

Encouraging Truths for Discouraging Times Pt.2
Acts 18: 5-11

We saw in this section Paul had come from Athens to Corinth, and started a mission here. We also saw there were some great encouragements and also some discouragements. We saw last time that Paul was preaching and teaching in the synagogue but the opposition had become so great in the synagogue that he was forced to leave. Now the vast majority of his outreach ministry would be to the Gentiles. There were many positive signs, but also many signs in this city and through the ministry of the gospel that greater suffering and hardship lay ahead. And if you go through all that Paul had suffered, we wonder how Paul could continue on. We find it difficult enough to continue on with the things in our life.

Paul chronicles some of the things writing later to this church in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28, **“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.”** Think your life is tough! It is easy to be dispassionate about this, but all of these hurt and all of them created anxiety and dread. Paul was made of flesh just like us, and you can imagine because suffering and opposition had only increased throughout Paul’s ministry.

And you get the sense from this vision in which the Lord Jesus appeared before Paul that he was getting tired and discouraged. And here we have a vision and a message from our Lord to Paul. And these are such encouraging truths for discouraging times. We realize that these truths are not just for Paul but for all of us. We all live with suffering and discouragement in this fallen world. Paul writes of the Old Testament narratives in 1 Corinthians 10:6, **“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.”** In other words, these truths are written for us and our admonition and encouragement. And the truths here really talk to us in our midst of our anxieties and fears and help us refocus them on Christ. The first thing Jesus said is a command, **“do not be afraid.”** It would be easy to be afraid if the Lord Jesus all of a sudden appeared before you, but it was not the sight of the heavenly visitor, but as we saw through this text it was the opposition and rising opposition that caused Paul’s fear.

And it is incredible how often God tells his servants throughout Scripture not to be afraid. And think of why he would tell them that. Their fears had become so great that they start to send them in a direction, or do things that are against the Lord’s will. They were controlled more by their fears than they were by the Lord. For Paul, his fear is really comes out in the second command given here, and that is **“but go on speaking and do not be silent.”** It would be easy to just stop speaking the truths of Christ if that brought about the opposition. Here is the truth — your fears and anxieties and worries will cause you to do things that are against the will of God. Many of the

angry outbursts that people have are because of fear. They have to get control and they cannot trust Christ. Why? Their fears are too big and Jesus is too small. Many times we are silent when given an opportunity to speak for the Lord because of fear. We all know what it is like to be gripped by fear, and have those fears control us.

But fear is not always a bad thing. When Jesus appeared before Paul it created a greater and more glorious fear, a comforting fear, and that is the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord doesn't cause us to retreat from him but draw close to him, listen to him, and follow him. He is in control. It is not people and situations. And what fears are controlling your life? Do you have such a knowledge of God, and has it saturated your heart so much that your life and even the problems and trials and temptations of your life are not chaotic or out of control? You can really submit to the one who is in control. And more than that, you can speak and live under the control of another. The fear of the Lord and his command not to fear but speak for him — live for him — truly is a life giving, direction giving command that changes our lives. We need to learn to fear him.

So life is hard and has the potential of being very fearful. And your fears right now are warring for control of your heart. So let's do battle with them. And how we do battle with them is with the encouraging truths and promises that are ours through our relationship with none other than Christ. Let's see a couple of these encouraging and life altering truths in our lives.

1. Be encouraged — you are never alone. V.10.

One of the things that makes life so difficult is the feeling we are all alone in our problems and difficulties. You can be in a room full of people who are talking and laughing, and yet feel all alone because of the anxieties and trials and pressures and huge disappointments in your life. I don't know how many times I have heard that from husbands and wives in the middle of their marriage. I feel like I am all alone. Yes, I know the Lord has planned this for my good and his glory, but there is so much opposition that I feel all alone. People who go through loss of a loved one can feel all alone. Because of social media which is supposed to bring people together, but individuals have no fleshly relationships but only with screens feel all alone. And life is tough. We were never meant to live all alone and in isolation. Often we do not know how to explain ourselves and our pain, and we think others wouldn't understand even if we could. And let me ask you — do you feel all alone? Our suffering has the potential of causing us to think that we are unique, and that creates fear and isolation.

Paul could have thought that he was all alone. Some got caught in the cross hairs of persecution with him, but he usually took the brunt of the opposition and persecution even though there are other believers around him. And those in spiritual leadership often are the first ones that are attacked. They are often vilified and pressured and bullied by others. I think every pastor could write a book on opposition. And again, feeling you are all alone in the trials and sufferings of life have a way of steering our hearts away from what we ought to do and what we ought to be. For Paul it was to be true to the calling of God to speak and testify of Christ. So look at what Jesus says here that is so encouraging, **“for I am with you.”** None other than Jesus Christ is with Paul. None other than the one who came and lived and died and rose again and ascended into heaven is with us. His love for us is unquestioned. Let that truth grasp your heart.

If you have been a Christian for a while you know there is no where you can go outside of the presence of our great God. He is what we call omnipresent or present everywhere, not in part but in whole. Many of you have memorized Psalm 139:8-12, **“If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.”** God is the ever present God. And certainly there is a warning to keep us from drifting or sinning. Nothing is ever done in secret or isolation, but in the presence of our God.

But I believe there is more here. This is not only a promise that God is with us. He is present, and if we think that someone is for us, it often causes us to take heart. We are thankful for those kinds of relationships we have in our lives. But it is not just that Jesus is with us but that he will give us everything we need to do what he has called us to do. That is the thing in our fears. We believe we are all alone and we do not have what it takes to carry on. In that tough marriage. I don’t know if I can do it and stay, let alone live the way that God wants me to live. In that failing body. I don’t know if I can go another day. In that loneliness at school because the kids do not like your faith. I don’t know if I can survive the isolation and loneliness and being picked on. I have fallen again, no one understands how tough this is, I might as well give up, I don’t know if I have the strength to give up. Have you ever been there? Are you there? I have and many times. Father, I don’t know if I can confront that person, talk to that congregant about his sin, take that criticism, preach that sermon with such hard and difficult truth.

Here is the promise — Christ is not only with you, but he will give you everything you need to live for him and be his witness — to not only go through but actually grow in loving him and grow in your relationship with the ever present and grace giving Christ. So think about it, when Moses was given the monumental task of leading the people of Israel out of Egyptian bondage, do you think he was up to the task? He already proved to be a failure. Think of the fear in his heart. But listen to what God says, because he does not say — you can do it, just believe in yourself, but listen to Exodus 3:12, **“He said, ‘But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.’”** God says I will be with you. God will not only be present but give whatever is lacking in Moses. He will give the strength and provision necessary. When Joshua was called to step into the shoes of Moses and lead the people into the promised land, and battle with these fortified cities, do you think he was up to the task or thought he was? Think of the fear. Listen to Joshua 1:5, **“No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.”** God will be with him, not just present but to grace Joshua with whatever he needs. Or how about Gideon who was hiding from the Midianites but now asked to lead the Israelites, and even cuts down his army to a mere handful. Here is every reason to fear! Do you think that he thought he was strong and capable enough? So why was he able to go in the

battle at hand? Listen to the promise given in Judges 6:16, **“And the LORD said to him, ‘But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.’”**

Over and over throughout Scripture we have this repeated phrase to the servants of the Most High God, servants who are weak and imperfect and fear — **“for I am with you.”** And that changes everything. God gives both his presence and provision. Moses leads the people, Joshua is able to conquer the land, Gideon is able to rout the Midian, but really the battle and victory is the Lord’s. Do you believe that you are not alone? Do you believe that whatever God has called you to that he is not only with you but he will also give you his all-sufficient provisions? He gives what is necessary to whatever he has called us to go through. Now that is so encouraging.

Let me give one other verse on this point to take with you, and that is the promise not only given to Israel but to all the people of God, to all those who are in Christ in Isaiah 43:1-2, **“But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.** (Now this is glorious. God has called us by name. He knows you personally. You are the object of his intimate love. He has redeemed us in Christ. We know this, so listen to the glorious promise in light of this truth) **When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you, when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”** Are you going through waters and rivers and fire? Oh Christian, you are not alone. Do you feel you don’t have what it takes? You are not left with your own resources. Wherever you are listen to the glorious promise of Jesus. He is with you. You can stand, live, get up, function — not because you are great but because of the One who is with you. Paul is able to speak. Why? **“For I am with you.”**

2. Be encouraged — God is sovereign over our trials. V.10.

There is such a comfort here that nothing can come into my life that has not been ordained or planned by the Lord. God is so sovereign over my life and over my sanctification and over using my life as a benefit for others, that there is nothing that comes into my life that he has not ordained. And God is so purposeful, which means that all of those things are there for a reason. They all have some good end in mind. We concentrate and get so angry or discouraged at the people, situations, circumstances in our lives, but God indicates we should do something else. And you know what that is? 1 Thessalonians 5:18, **“give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”** Not just some circumstances, but all circumstances we are to give thanks. And why? This is the will of God! Well, why is it the will of God to give thanks even in harmful and difficult things? The reason is God has ordained everything in my life. There is reason for every ache and pain, hard relationship and disappointment, every struggle and even every painful word said against you and me.

Because think of what is said here by Jesus to Paul, **“and no one will attack you to harm you.”** Now these words must have acted as a comfort but also as a warning in a sense. By saying that no one will attack you, Jesus is indicating to Paul that opposition is coming. It will look like you will suffer physically again, but in the end this will not come to fruition. Be ready that opposition will come. But he will not suffer stoning or another beating here at Corinth. And you have to think of all the things and

situations that God needs to control to make that come to pass, in order to guarantee that. Because there is opposition from the Jews. They do have the ear of those in power. Christianity is starting to cause a stir in a very ungodly city that loves their sin. Jesus has to control all the free acts of people, and even their histories to bring them to make those decisions that they make. And we will see that mounting opposition but also the control of our great Jesus as we go through this section.

But here is the comfort. Jesus is in control of everything that is in Paul's life and everything that is in my life. This does not mean that Paul will not suffer physical persecution in the future. And it does not mean even the the freedoms or peace that we enjoy today as believers in Christ we will have in the future. But the reason why we can go on speaking is not because the external pressures are less, but that our Jesus is ultimately in control. He says something similar in the Book of Revelation, but instead of no physical persecution there is a great persecution coming to them, but it is the same message — to not fear. Our God has ultimate control. He has reason and nothing of eternal value is ever in jeopardy in your life. Revelation 2:10, **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”** Be faithful. Trust in the all sovereign God who indicates what is going to take place, because he controls what is taking place. He will bring his good promises and purposes to fruition. And at the same time is never culpable for the evil that men do, but that evil will ultimately serve his purposes. Listen to this command given to tribulation saints, and take it to yourself — **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”** You have to know something about our God, and have a trust in this God in order to truly obey that command in all our suffering and pain in our lives. He really has good purposes.

Let me end with a couple of things that will help us lean on these encouraging truths given by Christ to Paul. One is that it should be evident that God has purpose to cause us to go through the things you are going through. And there is mystery in what he is doing, but there should always be comforts that we see through his Word. Think of the sufferings of Paul. What was God doing in and through him? Again, it was certainly wasn't easy for Paul. He says in 2 Corinthians 1:8, **“For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.”** Imagine, the apostle Paul despaired of life because of his afflictions in Asia. Where is the good in that? Listen to the next verse, **“Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”** Do you see one of the glorious purposes? We all want to live that life of dependance on God, where he is bigger and more glorious in our lives. We pray for a more intimate and stronger relationship with him. So what does he do? He shows us our weakness, so that we would rely on the one we were dependant on all along. He strengthens that relationship. He rids us of the sin of self-sufficiency from us. Think how serious we get about our relationship with God, think our earnestly we pray when suffering comes to our door. God has good purposes and that is to change us more and more into the blessed image of Christ, and long for the coming of our Lord, not to escape trials but because he has become altogether so lovely. We want to be with him.

That change can only come through the painful process you are in the midst of right now. Be so encouraged that he truly knows what is best and highest for you.

The second thing we see here is that God knows our limits. He knows what we can take, and is always producing his good in us. He is so active in our lives. Listen to 1 Corinthians 10:13, **“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”** We often think our trials are unique, “no one has ever suffered like me!”, but Paul says these categories of suffering are all common. We can understand others suffering and they can understand ours because we have these common categories and we live in the same fallen world of sin and suffering. But the encouragement here is God is faithful. He is faithful to us, and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can take. So he not only gives the grace necessary to go through the trials of life but also knows our limits. God knew Paul’s limits. He knows ours. So with the Lord’s help we are able to not only endure but go through and magnify him with whatever he has called us to go through. We can’t say can’t, and you know why? It is because our Lord Jesus Christ is faithful.

Let me ask you this morning, are you discouraged? Do you feel depleted in the middle of your life? The apostle Paul did, but he is given this encouraging revelation, and God arranged our lives that we would be here this morning to receive these encouraging truths. We do not need to fear but can go on speaking for Christ, because he is forever with us, giving us what we need to persevere and be his witnesses, and planned every trial for our good and his glory. You see the hope is not looking to principles but to a Person, none other than Christ. The more we gaze on him and recognize his provision in the midst of our sorrow we not only carry on but we are encouraged to make much of him. Oh, may all of us gaze upon his beauty and presence and be changed from one degree of glory to another.