

Reaching the City (Acts 18:1-19:20)

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Date: 30 October 2022

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[0 : 00] Yeah, could we just quickly turn to Acts chapter 18? I'll just read the verse 1 to 8, and we'll leave William to cover all some of the rest, all right?

So, yeah, this is the word of the Lord. After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.

Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath, he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads. I am innocent of it. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles. Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justice, a worshipper of God.

[1 : 13] Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord, and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized. One night, the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision, Do not be afraid.

Keep on speaking. Do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city. So, Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

When Galileo was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. This man, they charged, is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.

Just as Paul was about to speak, Galileo said to them, If you Jews are making complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you.

But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law, settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things. So he drove them off. Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes, the synagogue leader, and beat him in front of the proconsul.

[2 : 21] And Galileo showed no concern whatever. Thank you very much. And we will invite William. Please keep your Bibles open in Acts 18.

We are actually going to look at Acts 18 all the way through to 19:20. So obviously not every verse, but we'll do our best to just travel together with that.

So we didn't read the whole thing, so I encourage you, if you haven't already, to do so. Those of you who follow the daily Bible reading would have done it, but you're welcome to read this amazing passage anytime.

So why don't we pray and ask God to speak to us right now? Father, we've just heard some amazing interviews, testimonies of how the gospel has transformed individual lives.

And so, Father, be with us as we explore and see how the gospel can transform entire cities, cities like Corinth and Ephesus, and that we don't have to be afraid.

[3 : 30] We can keep speaking. Father, help us not to be silent now. Father, I pray all these things in Jesus' precious name. Amen. They call it revenge travel.

Revenge travel. Anyone been revenge traveling recently? Your first flight after COVID and lockdown and everything, right? After years of closed borders, bags have been packed.

Airports are super busy. Obviously, some people are traveling right now, not out of their own choice. Maybe they're refugees at the moment. We do grieve for that. But I think in this crowd, most of us, when you think travel, you're thinking, finally, finally I get to go, right?

Travel is something you want to do because we've had three years of seeing a family on a screen. Far better to be with them and give them a hug. You've had enough of watching travel bloggers. You want to taste and see all the stuff they've been doing for yourselves. And believe it or not, Acts chapter 18 to 19, it's a little bit of revenge travel.

[4 : 34] We're actually following a group of travelers as well. Now, they don't have 3,000, 100,000 people following them on social media. They probably have never boarded a plane before.

But these people are traveling because they are determined to bring the message of Jesus to Europe and Asia Minor. But the question that comes up is this.

Is Jesus believable enough for all the cultural elites in a city like Corinth? Can he change the hearts of superstitious people who live in Ephesus?

How does a good news travel in big cities? And what about a city like ours, Auckland? Is the gospel powerful enough for our city?

As we look around, as we live our lives and we see all the different things different people worship, we do wonder, don't we? Can the gospel really change our city? And if we listen to the loudest voices, maybe on media, we wouldn't be confident.

[5 : 39] You might have heard things said, Oh, Christians, you guys are a tiny minority. Or, surely smart people don't worship someone like Jesus.

Or, I don't think I can follow this guy. It's so foreign to my culture, my upbringing. But Paul and his friends, they've faced these kinds of objections before. Please remember how far we've come in the book of Acts.

Friends, don't you remember how the early church started? 120 people in an upper room.

Remember how she grew to thousands of Jews.

Even started to begin including Samaritans and Gentiles. The gospel breaking boundaries. And we've read through the book of Acts how there have been setbacks, there have been losses along the way, haven't we?

And yet, time and time again, we have heard the gospel keeps going. There's a big church argument in Acts chapter 6. And yet, verse 7 says, the word of God spread.

[6 : 40] There's fierce persecution from the ruling powers. But chapter 12, 24, the word of God continued to spread and flourish. And as we just memorized, right, after bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, making sure that Jesus is for everyone, so the churches were strengthened in the faith.

And they grew daily in numbers. The message of the risen Lord Jesus cannot be stopped. And two weeks ago, just before, just with Pastor Johan, remember how he shared from Acts chapter 17, right, the previous chapter, how, and he shared how the message we share about Jesus' death and his resurrection, that message must never change.

And yet, our methods may need to adapt to the culture we're trying to reach. And when we reach Acts 18 to 19, actually, there's a change in how Luke, the author, retells the story of the gospel going out.

And it comes, it's to do with time. You see, there's a change in time. Time almost stretches out from Acts chapter 18 onwards. You see, Paul's first missions trip in Acts 13 to 17, which we've looked at in previous weeks, that took place over two years, from 48 to 49 AD.

But in Acts 18 to 19, right, we actually see Paul spend twice as long, he spends four years in just two cities. In Acts 11, Paul, we read, stayed in Corinth for a year and a half.

[8 : 22] And then what you'll see in Acts 19 is that when he's in Ephesus, he enters the synagogue, he speaks there for three months, he gets kicked out by some angry uncles, he goes over to a lecture hall, he's there for two more years.

Can you see how time stretches out? Paul who shares and goes becomes Paul who settles in for long-term ministry. And so we're just going to have a quick, kind of like a tour guide view of Acts 18 to 19 today.

Look with me again at Acts 18, chapter 1. It says this, After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. If the internet was around in 51 AD, Corinth, I think, would have its own emoji.

Okay, because it's a beautiful city, it was modern, it was the largest city in the whole of Greece. It was a jewel in the Roman Empire's crown.

Corinth was a wealthy, very materialistic city. And kind of like Auckland, Corinth is set between two harbors. But Corinth was the kind of city that is so infamous for its immorality, for its wild living, that people would even say to each other, let's find somewhere quiet and go Corinthianizing.

[9 : 38] Wink, wink. How could God possibly transform a city like this for Christ? And what Luke tells us in these two chapters is this, he changes the cities, firstly, through ordinary believers.

Through ordinary believers. And in chapter 18, we see some of them, don't we? Verse 2, it says, Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish married couple, kicked out of Rome by the emperor for being Jewish. And yet they kept going, they kept serving. They wanted to be part of this new city that they had been kicked out to in Corinth. And it looks like Paul meets them, and this power couple actually become one of his key ministry partners.

Not only did they offer Paul some work making tents, eventually, in verse 18, they will actually travel with him to Ephesus.

And Ephesus, right, is just across the Mediterranean Sea, from Greece to modern-day Turkey. Ephesus was another wealthy harbor city. And this city sat on the coastline.

[10 : 49] It was even bigger than Corinth, actually. And it had this temple here, the temple of Artemis. And it was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world at the time.

We'll hear a bit more about it next week in the latter half of chapter 19. But you're going to see, from all the talk about evil spirits in chapter 19, that Ephesus was a city that was just full of superstition, of beliefs about spirits.

But it's here we meet another ordinary believer. All right? Have a look at verse 24. Meanwhile, a Jew named Apollo, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.

Paulus, Luke tells us, he was a very eloquent preacher. And he knew the Scriptures well. But while he taught about Jesus accurately, it seems like he didn't fully understand what was going on with Christian baptism.

It says here, verse 25, he knew only the baptism of John. So perhaps here we have someone who's kind of like a baby Christian, knows a little bit about some things and not others. What would you do if you'd met someone like Apollos?

[12 : 00] Okay? Imagine you're Priscilla and Aquila. You go on Saturday morning, you go to church while it's a synagogue. And preaching that day is a young guy. And he sounds and he's pretty persuasive, but something's not quite right in what he's talking about.

What would you do? Well, it looks like they go up to him and invite them to their home. And it says here, Priscilla and Aquila explain to him the way of God more adequately.

And this is what ministry looks like. Ordinary believers. Ordinary believers just doing what they can to share the gospel. And the result is this, right? After this kind of encounter, Apollos becomes an even better preacher, right?

Greatly helping those who grace had believed. Even able to refute opponents effectively. You see what happens? Here's another principle that we need to know.

How does a city get transformed by the gospel? Firstly, through ordinary believers, but secondly, through God's word in relationships. God's word in relationships.

[13 : 09] That's a second key principle. And we see that clearly as this married couple invite this young man and explain to him the word of God. There's a word and relationship happening there.

As young adults, Cheryl, my wife, and I, we used to just hang out at our pastor's house after church each Sunday. And some of you actually have been there. Actually, Enoch was there with us. We would just hang out every Sunday.

We'd just share a meal. We'd ask all kinds of curly questions. And it was nothing special, really. I mean, the food wasn't to die for. Mostly takeaways, whatever we could afford at the time.

KFC. There was a lot of KFC going on there. But God used his word in relationships to bring true growth, deep growth in Christ.

And so if this principle is true, then all of us can transform our city. Who can you invite to have a coffee? But not just have a coffee.

[14 : 12] Find a way to open up God's word together. At your next family dinner or work function, what gospel truth can be at the tip of your tongue so it's not just relationship, relationship, but a bit of God's wisdom as well thrown into the mix.

I mean, we've seen this before, though, haven't we, in Acts? Whether it's Jesus and his disciples, whether it's Philip and an Ethiopian eunuch, God is in the business of transforming men and women in cities like Corinth, Ephesus, Auckland.

How? Through the word in relationships. And Priscilla and Aquila are a married couple who get this, and they are able to help transform the city.

But don't be alarmed if you're not a married couple here, because you too can serve the Lord effectively, right? Because track back to verse 5, and who do we meet? We meet two single guys. We meet Silas, and we meet Timothy. And their backstory actually comes from Acts 17, which we heard two weeks ago. Remember how Paul was in Macedonia.

[15:16] He was preaching God's word with some very noble, scripture-searching believers in Berea. And actually, this church ends up hearing about some opposition coming.

They've been chasing Paul from city to city, and they send Paul off to Athens to escape that opposition, while Silas and Timothy stay behind to keep encouraging the saints there. But notice what happens in Acts 18, verse 5. It says here, When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

We have to read between the lines a little bit, but I think what happens here is that when Timothy and Silas comes, Paul does not have to tent-make anymore. He's able to be a full-time evangelist. Maybe Timothy and Silas took up the tent-making work so that Paul could be free to just keep evangelizing. Maybe these two blokes, they personally brought some financial support from the Christians in Macedonia, the kind of support that Paul thanks the Philippian church for in his letters.

[16:25] Can we see how flexible ministry can be? All right? And especially in the life of Paul. Sometimes he's a tent-maker, and sometimes he can preach full-time.

And brothers and sisters, we are all going to be called differently. And so I want to encourage you, your nine-to-five job is not worse than my standing here. The full-time campus worker is not more elite in their gospel outreach than someone who joins a summer project.

And yes, the camera's often on Paul, right? Especially in this part of the Book of Acts. I'm going to hear a lot about Paul. But I think Paul would not want us to think of him as kind of the main title character.

His name should not go on the movie poster to the Book of Acts. To the Corinthians, he actually writes, no more boasting about human leaders. We want to remember this, friends.

It takes a village to raise a child. It takes forwards and backs to win a rugby game. God advances the gospel through ordinary believers who serve together.

[17:31] Ordinary believers who serve together. I mean, verse 7, this is one of my favorite characters. Titia's Justice, right? Just gets mentioned once. We'll call him TJ.

Did you notice the irony here, though? Okay. Verse 6, the Jews oppose and reject Paul's preaching. Paul leaves the synagogue, right? He has a synagogue. And then where does he go? Next door. Isn't that crazy? And it's like, I'm going to see you later, Jews. I'm never seeing you again. And so this is exactly what's going on.

Because of Titia's Justice, TJ's hospitality, actually, Paul can keep reaching the Jews that just rejected him. Did you notice? He's talking to the Jews and the Greeks, and many of them believe. In fact, actually, it says here, Crispus, the synagogue ruler, ends up believing. So maybe you can just open your home. You might not be an eloquent preacher. Maybe you can just be hospitable.

[18:29] Imagine the gospel impact that you could have as well. But we mustn't overlook one brother, right? And we heard his story in verse 12 to 17.

Sosthenes. Seems like sometime later in Corinth, the Jews are playing church politics. They kind of stir up an attack on Paul. They bring him to court.

They want him to be kind of struck down. But the Roman governor, Gallio, doesn't want a bar of it. Because he rightly says, this is an in-house debate between you, okay?

Don't bring it to court. And at this, the furious mob, they turn on Sosthenes, and they beat him in front of the court. When Paul writes to the Corinthian church later, in the letter of 1 Corinthians, Sosthenes is named, his brother, right there with him.

Sosthenes, the former synagogue leader in Corinth. It's an amazing picture, isn't it, right?

Sosthenes used to lead this synagogue, probably after Crispus.

[19:40] Paul, helping out the house church next door, they're united in Christ. And what a transformation. How does it happen? Through ordinary believers, serving, and suffering together.

And friends, you need to know this. Sosthenes' suffering is not unique. We're seeing Paul mistreated himself, left for dead. And many of you, I know, have been through hard times for following Jesus.

Let's not be surprised. We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. Some of these hardships, I know, are close to home. Some of these are yet to come, perhaps.

But be encouraged, because it is through ordinary people like yourselves, serving and suffering together, that God can transform the city. He did it with Corinth.

He'll do it with Ephesus. And he can do it with a city like ours. As John Wesley once said, God, he buries his workmen, but he will carry on his work.

[20 : 48] He will carry on his work. And when Paul travels from Corinth to Ephesus in Acts 19, what we see is that God carries on his work.

The Holy Spirit's power is so obviously upon Jesus and his messenger, and the message that Jesus is being proclaimed. Luke actually ends the section in verse 20 with an amazing line, and it sounds very familiar, doesn't it?

In this way, verse 20, chapter 19, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. You see, Luke is telling us again the message of the risen Lord Jesus.

It cannot be stopped, not in Corinth, and now not in Ephesus either. God carries on his work. And yet, it could have turned out differently, couldn't it?

Think back to that scene that Isaac read for us early on in chapter 18, right? Nearly three years before this last verse. Right at the start of Paul's ministry in Corinth, he and his friends have been beaten, opposed, arrested.

[22 : 00] arrested. There's a thriving, growing new church, but it's young, maybe a little bit immature, and maybe very fragile. It could break down at any moment. And you know what?

We need to remember Paul is human like us. And I'm sure that at the very start, he would have thought, he could have thought, do I stay here and serve these people?

Would it be easy just to go and leave all these troubles behind? Well, thank God that in the midst of this, he gets a direct voice from the Lord, right?

Verse 9, one night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision, and the Lord himself says, do not be afraid, keep on speaking, do not be silent.

And so friends, just for the last few minutes, I want to give you a couple of reasons from the Bible why you and I don't have to be afraid. We can keep on speaking. We don't have to be silent about Jesus.

[23 : 04] Firstly, I think we see in Acts 18, 19 that Jesus is more believable than our society's skepticism. Jesus is more believable than how skeptical our society is.

Let me explain. In chapter 18, the kinds of words that Luke uses over and over again when it comes to sharing the gospel, they're actually reasoning and thinking words.

I mean, you can see it for yourself, verse 4, every Sabbath, he reasoned in the synagogue trying to persuade Jews and Greeks, testifying, verse 5, that Jesus is the Messiah, is what they're all about. All right? Apollos, verse 28, he's vigorously refusing the Jews. Do you see the theme? Do you see the theme? This is a theme that carries actually into Paul's letters to the Corinthian church.

The Corinthian church needed to be reminded, right? We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

[24 : 13] And so you see, Corinth was a city that needed to be persuaded about Jesus. What about Auckland? What about Auckland? Look, a generation ago, a typical Kiwi, non-Christian, might have said something like this, good on you, you go to church or you follow Jesus, good on you, but he's just not for me.

And yet today, even more so, and in the generations to come, I think, in the post-Christian West, we're going to be told that if you believe in Jesus, if you want to obey his commands seriously in life, you're hateful, you're a bigot, you need to be cancelled.

And look, sadly, sometimes the way that Christians act, you know, we deserve to be cancelled, right? And yet, so often, actually, what our secular society and culture really wants to say is this, be quiet, Christianity is not persuasive.

But I want to encourage you, don't be afraid. The truth that this world is authored and designed by a loving creator, the truth that, despite our brokenness, he willingly rescues us from our sins, he willingly saves us in his own son, Jesus Christ, that truth is still more persuasive, it's still persuading many people to come to Christ, whether on campus, whether in our families, or whether at work, it is still happening.

Because I believe that on topics like suffering, on sexuality, or identity, on purpose, whatever the topic, I'm convinced the gospel of Christ offers better, more satisfying answers than Islam, or Buddhism, or atheism.

[26 : 04] You need to know this, especially if you're doubting. When you follow Jesus, you actually join hundreds of thousands of rational, intelligent people who are persuaded by the facts that Jesus really did die and rise again for sinners.

He wasn't a liar. He was not a lunatic. He really is who he is, the Son of God, our Lord and God. To paraphrase one author really badly, the news about Jesus' death has been greatly exaggerated. And so, friends, keep believing in him. Keep speaking about him. Don't be silent about our Lord Jesus. He's more believable than what the skeptics suggest.

Secondly, I think we see in 18 to 19, Jesus is more powerful than our culture's superstitions. Acts 19, 1 to 20 is a pretty wild section, so you have to read in your own time.

But I think the main theme in this 20 verses is power. Power. Who truly has the power? There's a comical scene where there's seven sons of Skiver in verses 11 to 20.

[27 : 17] And there, the answer is clear. These evil spirits, they answer to Jesus. Jesus has the power. And look, nothing says Jesus is powerful, right?

Quite like a year's salary of magic books thrown into a big bonfire. Okay? That's powerful. Jesus is better than all that burning up right now. So that's power there.

But there's also that curious scene, isn't there, right? The first couple of verses in Acts 19. Here, I'll sum it up for you. Paul meets some followers of Jesus who seem to only have received the baptism of John.

Some of you remember John's story when we looked at Matthew 3, two years ago. And look, here too, in the name of Jesus, we see power. Because what happens here?

It says here, when the 12 guys are baptized in his name, verse 6 tells us the Holy Spirit comes on them, they speak in tongues and they prophesy.

[28 : 16] It's an unusual scene, but it emphasizes, again, the same principle. And it's perhaps even worth singing about. What a powerful name it is. It's the name of Jesus.

Maybe you're here and you think about power and fear a bit more. Actually, people from non-Western cultures often do. The average Thai Buddhist or Central Asian Muslim, they're not going to be endlessly debating the existence of God in class.

But, like those living in Ephesus, they probably want to know if there's someone more powerful than the rules and traditions, the forces that they are surrounded by.

And actually, even when I've chatted with some of you, some of you are actually much more concerned about this, whether Jesus is powerful enough, whether to overcome your health challenges, or to heal the inner demons that you're fighting, or just to stand firm against all the lies that you hear all the time about yourself, about others.

And to you, my friend, the Bible is clear. Jesus is more powerful. More powerful than any spiritual power. He is mighty to save.

[29 : 30] He is powerful to heal. It's no accident that Paul will write to the Ephesian church later on. Remember this line, Jesus, he is raised to life. He's seated at God's powerful right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion.

That's our Lord Jesus. And because that's our Lord Jesus, we don't have to be afraid. We can keep speaking. We don't have to be silent because he's believable.

He's powerful. And finally, Jesus himself tells us this. Verse 10. For I'm with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you because I have many people in this city.

I am with you. That is a powerful promise from the Lord himself. The promise of God's divine presence. It shows up all through scripture, doesn't it?

In different ways. Think about Isaac in the wilderness. Not this Isaac, but Isaac, Isaac, the first one. Fear not, he says, I'm with you.

[30 : 38] I'll bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake. Genesis 26. Or to Jacob, right? He's going to be the father of Israel. Behold, I'm with you and I will keep you wherever you go.

To the nation Israel himself through Isaiah, fear not, I'm with you. Don't be dismayed. I'm your God. Can you see this promise keep coming up over and over again?

And of course, our Lord Jesus. What did he promise? As you go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow all I've commanded you, behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.

What a powerful promise. And if we believe this promise, maybe it'll help us to, like Paul, stay put, to keep serving knowing God is with us. As we invite skeptical friends and family to consider Christianity, as we kind of babble out uncomfortably how Jesus loves our classmate or our co-worker, Jesus is with us.

He is Emmanuel, God with us. What a great promise. And in that same verse, do we also not see an equally amazing promise?

[32 : 04] I am with you, but also, I have many people in this city. I have many people in this city.

Let me pose to you a quick question. When you became a Christian, did you reach out for God or did God graciously save you? Did you reach out for God or did God graciously save you?

Well, this verse is a reminder that every one of you who follows Jesus has been chosen by God, appointed to believe, predestined and foreknown.

And let me suggest that if you truly grasp onto God's sovereignty, it will be rocket fuel to our evangelism. because God has people in this city, we go and we share.

We don't be silent. And God's promise to Paul as he keeps going, as he finds God's people in the cities of Corinth and Ephesus, we can claim that promise for ourselves as well.

[33 : 10] When you and I share the gospel, God will use it to turn lost sinners into his servants. because friends, we claim this promise.

He has many people in this city, right? And friends, we claim this promise again. He has many people in that city too. And friends, we go because he has many people in that city as well.

So friends, let's not be afraid. Let's keep reaching our city, our world for Christ. because he's promised us there are many people in this city.

Let's pray. Our great God and Father, your name is believable because Christ died and rose again. Your name is beautiful because there's no one like you. And Father, the name of Christ is powerful, mighty to save.

[34 : 16] And so we want to praise you. we thank you and we're challenged to go out, not be silent and tell others about your son Jesus. We pray all these things in your powerful name.

Amen.