

Series: The Relentless Gospel
A Long Stay in Corinth / August 22, 2021 / Daniel Hickenbotham
Acts 18:1-17

Context:

- Paul is coming off, in an earthly sense, a kind of a “failure” in Athens.
 - He had his chance to stand in the pocket trade with the philosophical big dogs.
 - To rise into the rarified air of the Areopagites and take a position of prominence.
 - But what did he do?
 - Called them all to quit their lifelong ideologies and idolatries, repent and follow the Jewish Messiah and they sent him away.
 - Before that it was prison/beating/split/stoning
 - So coming into Corinth, Paul wasn’t doing well physically or emotionally.
 - Look what he said in 1 Cor 2:1-3: “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. 2 I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling.”
 - Can you imagine how exhausted he must have been?
 - He was running on the power of the Holy Spirit and not much else... but he STILL has this calling to preach the Gospel
 - And now he comes into Corinth... In the immortal words of Obi Wan Kenobi: “You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy.”
 - A city **five times** as big as Athens... with just as much idolatry... just as much pagan influence.
 - And he doesn’t get to just quit... he still has the calling from God to preach the gospel.
 - Honestly... This is how much of the Christian life can be...
 - In the beginning, you have these stirring transformative moments, you get knocked off your proverbial horse, you’re energized and feel like you can go out and convert the whole world...
 - And then one thing after another happens...
 - If you are in a place like that this morning, this message is for you.
 - Now, I know some of you aren’t like this...
 - You are the energizer bunny of Good Works and Evangelization...
 - Praise God for people like you
 - You are such a blessing to the church
 - But this message is for you too.
 - Because whether you have never been in a season where you feel beat up and exhausted or you are in one right now, I can guarantee you are going to experience a season or two of weakness, and fear, and much trembling. Where the only thing that is enabling you to hang on is the fact that the Holy Spirit is hanging on to you.

- And as we will see, doing nothing is not an option for us...
- So let's turn to Acts 18 and see what happens next:
 - 18 After this, he left Athens and went to Corinth, 2 where he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul came to them, 3 and since they were of the same occupation, tentmakers by trade, he stayed with them and worked. 4 He reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade both Jews and Greeks.
- So how did Paul proceed... how do we proceed in the moment where the mission seems overwhelming?
- **Start Where You Stand. (Acts 18:1-6)**
 - In the field of emergency medicine there is something called a mass casualty incident...
 - Part of what makes these moments so overwhelming is there is so much need and such limited resources that you want to save the resources for those who "really need it."
 - But someone has to decide who really needs it.
 - So, the job of the first emergency team on scene is to start triage... to start determining who needs what and when...
 - Now this is perhaps the hardest job on scene. Because your decisions in triage are going to determine that some people are going to die so that more people can live.
 - And if that isn't overwhelming enough, there are other confusing factors such as:
 - Scene safety concerns
 - People calling for or demanding help
 - The visual trauma of injured people and bodies
 - Even getting started on triage is an overwhelming task.
 - Standing guideline for initiating triage.
 - Start Where You Stand
 - Find the victim closest to you and get the process started
- Paul is demonstrating the same kind of thing here... he has an overwhelming task... his resources were limited...
 - So since Paul was a Jew by ethnicity/culture/religion and a tentmaker by trade he establishes his home base with fellow Jewish tentmakers and starts evangelizing the Jews.
 - He doesn't walk the city to find the area or group of people most gripped by idolatry or poverty
 - He doesn't try and find those people least like him in ethnicity, culture, religion, or vocation.
 - He finds these people who by God's providence are very much like him and starts there.
 - Verse 4 says "he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade both the Jews and the Greeks (converts to Judaism)."
- When reinforcements arrive to help, it enables him to give up the tent making and focus solely on evangelizing the Jews. Read in verse 5:

- “When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself to preaching the word[b] and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah”
 - When he gets the chance he doubles down on what he is already doing.
- And is he successful?
 - Well... verse 6 indicates that it is a no:
 - 6 When they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his clothes and told them, “Your blood is on your own heads! I am innocent.[c] From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”
 - Can’t you just hear the threadbare emotions of Paul here? “YOUR BLOOD IS ON YOUR OWN HEADS!!”
 - Just 4 or 5 years later, writing to the Romans from this very city, Paul would speak so affectionately about his fellow Jews that he said he wished he could give up his own salvation for them to be saved.
 - But here he is undone with frustration at their rejection and blasphemy...
- Now Paul isn’t just throwing out some random phrase here.
 - He was referencing two kind of bookend passages from Ezekiel there... one that was read before the sermon: Ezekiel 3:17-18
 - God had given a message of warning to Ezekiel, to warn God’s people of the coming judgment. He tells Ezekiel, if you do not deliver this warning, sure the people will die because of their wickedness... but their blood will be on your hands
 - The second passage is Ezekiel 33:7-9
 - God continues to paint the picture of Ezekiel as a watchman on a wall, blowing a ram’s horn in warning of the coming judgement... “4 Then, if anyone hears the sound of the ram’s horn but ignores the warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his BLOOD WILL BE ON HIS HEAD.[a] 5 Since he heard the sound of the ram’s horn but ignored the warning, his death is his own fault.
- Paul here is saying, like he did in Athens, you are no longer without excuse...
 - Brothers and sisters, the message of Christ is vital... both for the hearer to hear but also for the proclaimer to proclaim.
- Sure... Paul is probably overly cranky here... but he is also being LOVING to them by calling things out as they are.
 - The second greatest commandment is what?
 - That comes from Leviticus 19 verse 18...
 - Do you know what Leviticus 19 verse 17 says?
 - “Do not harbor hatred against your brother. Rebuke your neighbor directly, and you will not incur guilt because of him.
 - As a conflict averse person... this makes my skin CRAWL....
- But Paul loved them enough to go to them even when he was exhausted and weak...
 - To tell them the Good News... which includes the rebuke of the bad news... which can frequently cause people to reject you...

- SO after you start where you stand and get rejected
 - WHAT DO YOU DO THEN?

- **Next, Step Out the Front Door. (Acts 18:7-8)**

- Honestly, this point could just be folded in the first point. But I am a preacher... so you know there has to be 3 points in every sermon.
 - And there is something to be learned here.
- I love what it says in Acts 18:7-8:
 - “So he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. 8 Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, along with his whole household. Many of the Corinthians, when they heard, believed and were baptized.”
 - So Paul, has again, experienced a failure in an earthly sense with the Jews over all, so once he realizes that that door is closed... he moves on... literally... to the house next door...
- What this highlights is both the urgency of and the sovereignty of God in the task of witnessing and discipleship.
 - The sovereignty of God, in that Paul left the judgment of the synagogue in the hands of God and continued on with the overarching task that God had called him to do.
 - He had certainly worked hard there, but he trusted the results of his work to God. When God closed the door there, he didn't give up on his appointed mission.

- It demonstrates the urgency of the task, in that he didn't take time to lick his wounds, or deconstruct and debrief what had happened...
 - He walked out that slamming door... hooked a right... or a left... walked through the door there... and got back to work... got back into the fight... and this time, happily, he got to see some results!!
 - Brothers and sisters there are certainly times when a good plan is important...
 - ...but sometimes Christian life and ministry is as simple as "keep moving forward."
 - Trust God and do the next right thing...
 - This starting where you stand and then moving next door.... is how the Gospel goes forward in the world. What does Acts 1:8 say:
 - "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
 - The church... Jerusalem... Judea... Samaria... the ends of the earth.
 - This how it goes forward on a macro scale... it goes right next door...
 - But it is also how it goes forward on a micro scale...
 - You... Your family or your roommate... Your neighbor... Your other neighbor... Your teammate... your coworker...
 - Stepping out to the proverbial, and in this case literal, next door is how we obey the Great Commission.
 - When we do, like with the early church, we will see some people converted, some people dismissive, and we will see some come after us. How do you handle all three of those scenarios?
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- **Entrust Yourself to the One Who Judges Justly. (Acts 18:9-17)**
 - Read with me Acts 18:7-13
 - 9 The Lord said to Paul in a night vision, "Don't be afraid, but keep on speaking and don't be silent. 10 For I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to hurt you, because I have many people in this city." (Well that must have been a huge relief to Paul... or wait I am not going to get stoned or beaten here?) 11 He stayed there a year and a half, teaching the word of God among them. (And then the twist...) 12 While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack against Paul and brought him to the tribunal. 13 "This man," they said, "is persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to the law."

- Having been given a reprieve from the perpetual state of persecution and danger, Paul understandably set up in Corinth for a year and a half.
 - What a joy it must have been to be able to devote himself, under this promise of God, to the work of the Kingdom in Corinth.
 - What a gift it was to be able to pause his frenzied travels and recover physically and build relationships with this fledgling church.
 - Friends we pray for times like this. We advocate for times like this. So that the long-term work of the kingdom can be invested in.
- And then all of a sudden, he is once again being dragged into the courts...
 - They bring him before the Pronconsul's tribunal leveling a charge at him, which at best amounted to heresy and worst amounted to insurrection.
 - They had been designated a religio licita... a legal religion... due to the antiquity of their system... even though their religion excluded worshipping other deities (like Caesar considered himself to be).
 - So, when they come to Gallio saying he is teaching people to worship in ways contrary to the Torah, they were trying to delegitimize any legal protection for Paul or for Christianity.
 - "He's not practicing Judaism!"
 - And if delegitimized, while still claiming that Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, he would be considered a heretic by both Judaism and the Imperial Cultists...
 - ...and potentially an insurrectionist, for trying to convert others to obedience to Christ.
 - So, I can imagine that Paul was clinging to God's promise that no harm would come to him in Corinth.
 - And then we read what happens next:
 - "14 As Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or of a serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you Jews. 15 But if these are questions about words, names, and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of such things." 16 So he drove them from the tribunal. 17 And they all seized Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal, but none of these things mattered to Gallio."
- What happens here is incredible:
 - The Jews, attempted to use the unjust system to get the Gospel, and its followers, declared illegal.
 - And this unjust judge Gallio... flips their efforts on its head.
 - Gallio is unjust, for two reasons here...
 - In refusing to decide the case... he gives tacit legal approval to Christianity as a sect of Judaism.
 - God uses injustice to give LEGAL STANDING to Christianity.
 - Amicus Brief
 - Just like we saw in Athens, where Christianity has rational standing in the marketplace, we see now in Corinth that it has legal standing in the courts.

- Because just like we saw in Athens... Christ authority is over all... including economic and judicial systems.

Application:

- **Start Where You Stand**

- If you have the Gospel... you are the watchman with the ram's horn. Start blowing... you can be equipped to blow it more powerfully or gracefully or whatever. But you can do that after you have started!!
- Start. To paraphrase Mike Hickenbotham: "It may be hard to course correct a moving aircraft carrier... but its impossible to course correct one that isn't moving."
 - As a guy who tends to overthink and underact, a lot of the time it is because I want to do the absolute best thing with my limited resources...
 - So when something needs to get done:
 - I try to understand the back story of how we got to this point
 - I research the alternatives for accomplishing the task
 - I analyze the opportunity costs of different strategies
 - I am not the ready, fire, aim guy...
 - I am the ready, reeeeeeady, ready, aim, aim aiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiim, aaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiim, get ready again, aim again, kind of guy.
 - Ask my wife. Ask Jeff.
 - But once I pick a direction... That's where I am moving... and the Lord help you if you suggest otherwise.
- And when it comes to the work of the kingdom, in particular things like evangelism and discipleship, MOST people, I think, are like me.
 - We want to make sure we have a good strategy
 - Or we are just overwhelmed by the enormity of the task... there is too much hurt... too much brokenness... too much evil... too much to do
 - So what it translates to: we don't do it. And we get stuck in a repeating cycle of not doing it.
- Now, most of us aren't going to be called to a foreign land as missionaries.
 - You aren't going to have to get your feet under you in a new city. You aren't recovering from a stoning
 - You have a home base... its called your home...
 - Start there.

- **Next, Step Out Next Door**

- Again, some of you should be considering the missions field.
 - But most of you have a missions field next door to you or sitting in the next cubicle.
 - What happens when you try and fail there?
 - You move to the next door. Next cubicle.
 - Then try the next one.

- In order to do this you must have a sense of urgency and of God's sovereignty in it.
 - To get that you need to foster and develop an understanding of God's character and worth.
 - Then lean into the sovereignty of God over the whole experience.
- **Entrust Yourself to the One Who Judges Justly**
 - Emotional outburst/failure
 - Your blood is on your head seems to have worked... the Leader of the synagogue believed...
 - Persecution/Injustice
 - God uses injustice
 - Even if you die... the judge of the earth will do what is right...