



FACING YOUR FEARS
Acts 18:1-11

The Bible is only sixty-six verses old when the reality of fear grips the soul and spirit of Adam and Eve. In the third chapter we find Adam and Eve hiding and running away from the presence of God. This reality of fear is an ongoing historical reality in the biblical drama. Moses felt it when he had to confront Pharaoh – Daniel in the lion’s den – Gideon as he went into battle with a small army – and David as he faced Goliath.

We see the reality of fear until the closing pages of the book of the Revelation. As a matter of fact the book of Revelation was written to provide encouragement in the midst of a very fearful time in the life of God’s people.

The power of fear can be deadly. This is the strategy of the terrorists, and the powers of darkness in high places. They not only attack our buildings – but our way and pursuit of life. They want to immobilize us and paralyze our mission and ministry.

As I read the word of God – the biblical visions – like Paul’s today – most often do begin with these words of assurance and comfort – **FEAR NOT**. These words also appear in both the Christmas and Easter accounts.

The reason why the Bible is such a great book is that it does not hide or disguise this challenging side of life – as we can plainly see from our lesson today.

Let us dig into our lesson today from **Acts 18:1-11**. As we continue in our study from the book of Acts – we see another transition in the life of the Apostle Paul.

Paul leaves the great city of Athens – and is on his way to Corinth. When Paul left Athens he was very discouraged and disillusioned. It had been tough in this sophisticated center of learning to make a significant impact with the preaching of the gospel. Paul had been whipped and jailed in Philippi – chased out of Thessalonica and Berea and politely ridiculed in Athens. He has been beaten – harassed and ridiculed.

Rejection – even in God’s work – is never easy. While the ministry in Europe has begun on this his second missionary journey – it has taken a toll on the Apostle Paul. This has had an impact upon Paul physically – mentally – and spiritually. I believe we catch a spirit of tiredness when Paul comes to Corinth. So in **verses 9, 10, & 11** – the Lord speaks to Paul in a vision in the dark of night, “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 for 18 months teaching them the word of God.” This vision gave Paul a renewed sense of the ministry and mission that God had called him to.

So let us turn our eyes to verse one Paul leaves Athens – and went to Corinth. At this time Corinth was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Only Rome and Alexandria were larger. Corinth had been rebuilt by none other than Julius Caesar. The people of Corinth were a proud people – and boasted of its wealth and prestige. Corinth – like Philadelphia or Baltimore – was truly a cosmopolitan city. The city was full of citizens from every race – class – and creed. It would be very strategic to establish a church here. However, it would be a tough place to preach – because the cross undermines all human pride. It insists that we sinners have absolutely nothing with which to buy – or contribute to our salvation.¹ That was a revolutionary way of thinking then and now.

Twice in my life – I have been privileged to visit Corinth and spend a day and night there. Corinth – with its strategic seaports – became a great center of commerce and commercial activity. As you can see from this famous canal built in 1893 – it connected two great bodies of water. Goods and commerce in Paul’s day were loaded and unloaded by hand across this isthmus.

Therefore, Corinth became a place of great wealth and prosperity. As we know here in America – prosperity and wealth can bring great arrogance. We have seen this displayed in the great scandals that have rocked the Wall Street community these past weeks. Wealth can almost achieve god-like status and be worshiped and glorified.

However, Dr. John Stott and most Bible teachers believe it was the “Immorality of the Corinthian people and culture which intimidated Paul.”² I remember once taking my wife Mary and our two children through Times Square in New York City and telling them not look – or read the signs.

Yes, Corinth was a most wicked and immoral city. It was a place of great moral corruption. The Greeks had a phrase “to play the Corinthian,” which meant to live a life of lustful debauchery. It was an insult to call a person a Corinthian. The very word stood for perversion – especially sexual perversion. It was a wild and aggressive place to live.

To further clarify the challenge that Paul faced was the fact that Corinth was the center of the cult of the love goddess Aphrodite. Venus was the Roman name – Aphrodite the Greek name.

As Paul approached the city of Corinth – the first landmark he would have seen from a distance was the Temple of Aphrodite. It was considered one of the great architectural wonders of the ancient world. Beautiful on the outside – but immoral to its very core on the inside.

This Temple of Aphrodite – at the height of its immoral influence – employed over 1,000 temple prostitutes. They were never at a loss for business with all the sailors and merchants who passed through the town. At night the prostitutes came down to the city streets to ply their trade. Now you understand why Paul had such a challenge here to preach the Christian perspective that the “body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit.”

Here Paul had to preach about the sacredness of the husband/wife relationship and the marriage bed. However, it was to this city and its citizens that Paul would write the famous **Love** chapter of **I Corinthians 13**. So, the very iniquity of Corinth – was an opportunity for the gospel of Christ to take root and transform their lives.

One of the reasons that it had been tough sledding for Paul was that he was traveling alone. It is tough to do ministry and mission alone – especially in such a challenging environment. Paul had been traveling alone because Luke, Timothy, and Silas had been dispatched or left in various other places to continue to nurture and instruct the Christian churches already planted.

Here we see that wherever God guides us – he also provides for us. There is great value/encouragement in doing ministry as a team. That is why our Lay Leadership Team constantly seeks to find and place people in places of ministry. A work project always goes easier and is more enjoyable when others come alongside to help. Staff and committee chairpersons don't burn out as easily when others are there to lend a hand. Ministry is always so affirming when a group - large or small - work together to reach consensus and do the work of the kingdom.

We know that our Lord Jesus Christ sent out the disciples on their first missionary training experience two by two. They needed each other. They needed mutual encouragement and support. That is why our church family is always impoverished when you are not here. Your presence always touches another life. There is always a horizontal and vertical dimension to our worship.

So in **verse 2** – God provides support – and friendship in Priscilla and Aquila. This is one of the first husband/wife teams we find in ministry in the New Testament. They – like Paul – had been persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ.

We know that in **Romans 16:3-4**, Paul calls them “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me.” Everybody needs people like them in our journey of faith. They are excellent role models for the Christian community.

Secondly we know Paul was penniless when he arrived in Corinth. When Paul arrived in Corinth – he went to the spot where tent makers would gather and practice their craft. Paul (then Saul) had been trained as a tent maker in Tarsus.

Paul always traveled with his Bible (scrolls) and his tool kit. Paul practiced what he preached in **II Thessalonians 3:10**, “If a man will not work – he shall not eat.” Some

in this church family know how deeply financial concerns can affect our health and attitude. However, Paul learned to be content in all circumstances.

Thank God for Priscilla and Aquila who opened both their hearts and their home for Paul. This ministry of hospitality – as Bishop Schnase shares in his book – has always been a key ingredient in the ministry and mission of the church. I recently received a note from our Kitchen Ministry of an incident in which our church family did not do a good job in this area. We must be ever vigilant in this area of church life.

Let us now move to **verse 5**. Here we see that more reinforcements arrive. Timothy and Silas arrived from Macedonia and most likely bring a love offering and resources that enable Paul to once again work fulltime at evangelizing Corinth.

It set him apart – not above – for ministry and mission. This is the same principle at work that frees up our staff for the work and pursuit of ministry. It is the tithes and offerings of God's people that help this to take place. The church is much more than a building – it is a community that gathers. Once it gathers – then it scatters to be salt, light, and leaven for our Lord.

Now in **verses 7 and 8** we observe that Paul – now reinforced by the mutual support and ministry of his colleagues – begins to bear fruit from his labor. Let us look at the membership rolls of First Church – Corinth:

- **Crispus** – the ruler of the local synagogue. He converts to the faith – along with his entire household. Crispus would be a very valuable person to have on your team. Imagine the buzz that must have caused in the neighborhood.
- **Titius Justus** – just happens to own the house next door to the synagogue. Most scholars believe this became the site of the first house church in Corinth. Titius Justus was most likely a Gentile believer. When the Jews rejected him – he went to the Gentile. Now you see why all the previous transitions we have studied were so important.
- Other Corinthians believed and were baptized. This showed that Paul's decision to move beyond the synagogue to the neighborhood was confirmed to be of 'God
- This brought great encouragement to Paul and the team. They were not laboring in vain. They were making progress.

The last thing God did to encourage Paul was to speak to him in a vision. The vision had 5 parts to it:

- **Do not be afraid** – God wanted Paul to focus on the power of faith. Fear is wasted energy. He was to face his fear and stare it down and fill that space with faith in the living God.

- **Keep on speaking – do not be silent.** The abuse from the Jews and this tough immoral culture must have caused Paul to say, “What’s the use?” God does not have Paul change his methods or message.

If faith comes from hearing the message – and the message is heard through the word of Christ – then God needed Paul to keep on keeping on.

- **God reassures Paul, “I am with you. No one is going to attack and harm you.”** This is proven in **Acts 18:12-17**. Paul receives a favorable verdict from the local ruler. Paul is vindicated by Roman law.
- **“I have many people in this city.”** Even if Paul cannot see them or recognize them – God does! Paul is to walk by faith – not by human sight alone.
- **This vision grants Paul and his team a renewed sense of the ministry and mission that God called him to.** He stayed in the city of Corinth for 18 months. Up to this point in Paul’s missionary life – this was his longest stay in one place.

The city has been an important place for ministry and mission for centuries. Methodism – birthed in Baltimore – Philadelphia – New York City spread across the land from Lovely Lane Church in Baltimore, Old St. George’s in Philadelphia, and John Street Church in New York City.

Almost 50% of the world’s population lives in cities. For the first 15 years of my ministerial career I worked in Reading – Chester – and Easton, PA. You notice today how Islam strategically places itself in cities to spread its message.

In concluding today – I hope you see the importance of not going it alone.

I hope you see the imperative to simply plant the seeds of faith – do our part in nurturing them – and leave the rest to God to bless and multiply.

Finally, I hope you see the importance of our faith in the living God to face any fear in life – and to walk by faith – not by sight.

May God give us the courage so to do.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

January 25, 2009 10:30 a.m. service – February 8, 2009 8:30 a.m. service

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ENDNOTES

¹ John Stott, **THE MESSAGE OF ACTS: The Spirit, the Church, and the World**, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 60515, page 295.

² Stott, *ibid*, page 295.