

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BY HIS PROMOTING HIS POWERFUL WORD

Acts 18:1-17

INTRODUCTION

It is without question that this word from God, this message about the historical man Jesus who is the Christ and of his suffering and death for sinners is, from the eternal God's point of view, the most important thing in this world. It is this message of good news that is the foundation upon which the church is built. If there is one thing we have seen repeatedly in the book of Acts it is that proclaiming and teaching this "word of the Lord" is the main work of the church. There is no church apart from this word. There is no salvation apart from this word. Without a clear and consistent declaration of this word of the cross there is no way to be a Christian or to grow as a Christian. Therefore, what we are going to observe again in this text is God's commitment to this message about Jesus. The Almighty God, whom as we saw last week is the creator of all things and the Lord over all things and who needs nothing from us but who gives to every individual human being in the whole world life and breath and everything else—this God exercises his omnipotent power to promote this powerful word about Jesus and his saving work. God's power is most clearly revealed, not in miracles, not in the good deeds of Christians, not in super novae and black holes and tornadoes but in his using his word to save his people. As we watch Paul come to the great city of Corinth, the Las Vegas of the Roman world, populated by over 200,000 Italian and Greek people with a smattering of Jewish people we will observe the ways in which God exercises his power on behalf of his word.

MAIN POINT

God exercises his power on behalf of his word by...

I. Providing for his messengers (vv. 1-5)

The first thing we are told is that when Paul arrives in Corinth he finds a man and his wife, Aquila and Priscilla. Aquila is a native of the region of Pontus which is located on the southern shore of the Black Sea, some 600 air miles from Corinth. He and his wife are Jewish. They used to live in Rome but were forced to leave in 49 A.D. when the emperor Claudius, in an act of gross anti-Semitism, commanded that all Jews leave Rome. He and his wife have come to Corinth to live and during the two years since their arrival have set up business as tentmakers. Paul comes to live with them and to work in partnership with them for we discover here that Paul also is a tentmaker. While we are not told this explicitly here, based upon what we've witnessed in Philippi with Lydia and in Thessalonica with Jason—Paul lives with Christians in the towns he ministers in, then this couple is a Christian couple. However, we know from the rest of the NT that unlike Lydia and Jason they were Christians before Paul met them. While Paul works to support himself by partnering with them in tent making, each Sabbath day he goes into the Jewish synagogue and reasons with both the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks. Paul is working six days of the week probably from sunup to sundown making waterproof coverings and then every Saturday he is in the synagogue teaching the OT Scriptures to prove that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and the only one who can save people from their sins.

I want you to marvel with me at how God has provided for Paul so that he can preach the good news about Jesus. He brought a Jewish guy who grew up in a remote Roman province to live in Rome. Either while he lived in Pontus or when he moved to Rome he and his wife heard the gospel and they believed. Interestingly there were Jewish people from both the region of Pontus and the city of Rome in Jerusalem on that day of Pentecost when the HS came upon the 120 Christians gathered in the upper room and Peter preached the gospel and 3000 Jewish people from all over the Roman Empire believed. It would not be hard to imagine that Aquila and Priscilla heard the gospel from one of the first converts to the Christian faith. Then God directed the emperor Claudius to evict all the Jews from Rome which would include Aquila and Priscilla. Not only has he brought them here to Corinth as Christians but they also share in common with Paul the same trade. So God has a place for Paul to live and a way for him to support himself so that he can preach the gospel every Saturday to the Jews and God-fearing Greeks who meet in the synagogue.

Then we find out in v. 5 that Silas and Timothy come to him from Macedonia. We know from Paul's second letter to these Corinthians that Silas and Timothy brought a financial gift from the Macedonian church, most likely Philippi. Thus Paul is able to be completely occupied with teaching the word in the Jewish synagogue, demonstrating convincingly that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah described in the OT. Then also notice in v. 7 that when he leaves the synagogue the Lord provides the home of a wealthy convert to Christ so that he can continue to teach the gospel in Corinth. In all these ways God provides for Paul so that he can preach the gospel.

Paul describes in great length the way in which he obtained the physical necessities of life while he lived with the Corinthians for the year and a half he was with them in both of his letters to this church. In those letters he asserts that it is the right of all who preach the gospel to be financially supported by those who receive that word. However, he says that he did not make use of that right when he was with them so that no one could accuse him of preaching the word of the Lord in order to make money. In 2 Corinthians 11:7-9 he says, "Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need." While Paul did not make use of his right of support while in Corinth he does gratefully receive the financial help of other churches so that he can devote himself fully to preaching the gospel. He asserts in several of his letters that each local church is to financially support called and gifted men to give their full time to preaching the gospel. This is the ordinary way in which God provides for his messengers to proclaim and teach the word of the Lord.

I think we can also see here a basic principal that applies to more than just full time vocational pastors and missionaries. According to the NT every parent is a pastor to his or her children. We are like Paul prior to the arrival of Silas and Timothy with that financial gift from Philippi. We work to provide for the physical necessities in our lives so that we can daily preach the gospel to our children when we are not working. It is a great error to think that our work is done when we come home from our paying job or when we've taken care of our housework. God supplies us parents with the necessities of life so that we can study the gospel in order to teach the gospel to our children. Also, Paul's example is also a great encouragement to those men and women whom God is calling to engage in the work of teaching the gospel, not to the entire congregation but to some smaller subset of the congregation. There are men and women among us whom God is calling to teach the gospel during the hours when they are not working to provide for physical necessities. God is providing for them through their day job so that they can engage in the work of teaching the word of the Lord during these other hours. I am not saying that everyone is called to this work and I am not saying that this is the only purpose of God in your day job but I am saying that there are some people in every local church in addition to the vocational pastors that God is calling to teach the gospel to others during the hours they are not working to supply their physical necessities.

God exercises his power on behalf of his word by...

- *Providing for his messengers*
- *And by...*

II. Pronouncing judgment on those who reject it (vv. 6-7)

Paul spends some unspecified period of time seeking to convince the Jews in the synagogue that the historical Jesus is the Messiah promised in the OT. However, eventually most of the Jews began to resist and blaspheme the message of Jesus. The majority of the Jewish people began to verbally declare that Paul was wrong, that Jesus was not the Messiah, that salvation was not given to those who trusted in him but salvation belonged only to those who became Jewish and followed all the OT laws as they did. This was no civil debate but rather full of insulting and blasphemous language. These Jewish people made it clear that they were convinced that this Jesus was a nothing and a nobody. They refused to see what is plainly taught in the OT Scriptures that the Messiah had to suffer and die and then be raised from the dead. So Paul, like Jesus, like the OT prophets declares that these men and women are now subject to God's judgment. Paul says that he is now clear of any

guilt for he has faithfully made known to them the message of salvation and since they refuse to accept this message they will now die for their sins.

Paul is clearly repeating what God told the OT prophet Ezekiel. God says in Ezekiel 33:7-9, “So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.” So Paul is saying that he has warned them to turn from their wicked unbelief in Jesus and to trust in him so they can save their souls from God’s wrath. However, they have refused and so he is innocent of their death because he has warned them. They are going to die in their sins and go to hell for refusing to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus who is the Christ. It is part of his responsibility as a faithful watchman, a preacher of the gospel to inform people that if they refuse to repent and believe only wrath awaits them. Preachers who do not warn people of wrath and judgment are not saying what God wants them to say. I say to all of you, if you do not respond in faith to the message of the gospel as it is being taught by me and the elders and small groups leaders and parents among us then your blood will be upon your own head, that is you will die for your many sins. But there is a way of escape and so I urge you to take it. Trust in Christ now, today, do not wait any longer for God is sending his army against this city and all who do not make peace with him through Christ will perish.

Then Paul goes to the home of one of the God-fearing Greeks who heard him in the synagogue and believed the gospel and continues to teach the word of the Lord there. This house is next door to the synagogue. So every day, including Saturdays, crowds of people gather in Titius Justus’ home to listen to Paul teach the Bible, explaining the suffering and glory of Christ revealed in the OT so that men and women will trust in him. You can imagine how irritating that must have been to the Jewish leaders. Yet it also is a mark of God’s mercy as it is obvious to every Jew that if they want they can come to hear this gospel at any time. The door is still open. The people in the city can still hear the watchman giving warning and so prepare for the coming wrath.

Every pastor, every elder, every parent, every small group leader needs to hear the word of the Lord directed to Ezekiel and applied by Paul. Each of us needs to ask ourselves if we are faithfully warning those wicked people God has called us to warn about the coming wrath and the way to escape it that God has made through Christ. If we do not faithfully fulfill the calling God has given to us then God will hold us accountable. People will go to hell because of their sins, not because we didn’t tell them the gospel. However, we will be judged for not telling them the gospel. I do not really care whether or not you like what I say each Sunday. I care what God thinks about what I say each Sunday. My aim is not to please you but to warn you and to show you the way to escape. I aim to stand before God innocent of your blood if you choose to not heed what I say. I do not care if my children do not like Family Worship or like my talking with them about Christ. I care about whether or not God thinks I have been a faithful watchman in relation to them. It is a deadly thing to judge your success as a pastor or small group leader or parent by whether or not the people whom you are seeking to teach the gospel like you. It is a deadly thing for a church to judge its success on how many people enjoy coming to its services. The primary concern must be this: am I being a faithful watchman in relation to the people God has called me to warn? Are we being a faithful watchman, as a church, in relation to the community God has placed us in?

God exercises his power on behalf of his word by...

- *Providing for his messengers*
- *Pronouncing judgment on those who reject it*
- *And by...*

III. Preserving his people by it (vv. 8-11)

In vv. 7-8 we find out that there has been some fruit from Paul’s preaching in the synagogue at Corinth. A Gentile, most likely a wealthy Roman citizen named Titius Justus and the ruler of the synagogue, a man named Crispus along with his entire household have been saved from God’s wrath and become members of God’s

people, the church. In addition many more Corinthians hearing Paul preach have believed and been baptized. There is now a church in Corinth which is meeting in Titius' home to hear the word of the Lord. Then the Lord Jesus speaks to Paul in a vision during the night. He tells him five things: Do not be afraid. Keep on preaching this gospel of Christ. I am with you. No one will attack you and so harm you. There are many people in the city of Corinth that belong to me.

It is that last thing that is the main thing God wants Paul to know. God has many lost sheep in Corinth that he intends to gather into his fold. The way in which God will gather his sheep together is through Paul faithfully proclaiming this word of the gospel. I know there are some of you that are probably tired of my drawing your attention to these statements in the Bible. But I do so in order to help all of us appreciate the glory of this gospel. It is a gospel of free grace from beginning to end. Jesus is telling Paul here what he repeatedly said during his earthly ministry. John 6:37, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out." John 6:39, "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day." John 17:6, "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word." God, from all of eternity has had a specific people that he intends to save out of the world. He sent his son into the world to die and rise again for those people. He gathers those people of his together into one flock, one church through the proclamation of the gospel and by the regenerating work of the HS. God does not decide whom he will save based on anything in his people but entirely according to his own pleasure and will. Thus salvation is a work of unmerited favor from beginning to end.

We do not know who these people are in Janesville any more than Paul knew who these people were in Corinth. The only way to find out who the people of God are is to proclaim the gospel and command people to believe and all those that believe or, as Jesus said, "keep his word" are God's people. Therefore, once again we are told why it is so critical that every pastor, every parent, every small group leader, every church make teaching and preaching this gospel with clarity the main thing that we do. The only way God's people will be preserved from eternal hell and brought into the kingdom of God is through the preaching of this word. This is the only reason anyone can have any hope of success when we teach God's word: God still has people he intends to save. If all of God's people were already brought safely into the kingdom, then Jesus would return. Therefore, we can preach and teach this gospel with confident expectation that some will believe, because God yet has more of his people to save.

God exercises his power on behalf of his word by...

- *Providing for his messengers*
- *Pronouncing judgment on those who reject it*
- *Preserving his people by it*
- *And by...*

IV. Protecting it according to his own wisdom (vv. 12-17)

Sometime during that 18 month stay in Corinth the Jewish unbelievers came together and seized Paul and brought him before the Roman governor of the province of Achaia, a man named Gallio. They accuse Paul of persuading people to worship God contrary to the law. In their accusation there is a double meaning. They accuse Paul of being a false teacher in the Jewish religion, teaching people that Gentiles are loved by God and belong to the people of God simply by faith in Jesus and not by becoming Jewish. In their view he is teaching contrary to the OT. However, their meaning for the Roman governor is that Paul is not Jewish and therefore he is promoting an illegal religion. Judaism had a special legal status in the Roman Empire that was not given to any other non-Roman religion. Therefore, their aim is to get a Roman governor, not just an official over a city but a governor to declare Christianity illegal which would then have an impact throughout the entire Roman Empire. This is a very shrewd political, legal move that the Jews are making.

However, as Paul begins to open his mouth to make a defense Gallio dismisses the claim of the Jews. He says that if they were bringing a serious charge of wrong-doing or of some violent criminal act on the part of Paul he

would be happy to render a judgment. But since this is a dispute about purely religious, Jewish issues he tells them he will not get involved and they will have to figure it out among themselves. In making this judgment he turned the plot of the Jews upon its head. Rather than getting a legal precedent that would make Christianity a separate and therefore illegal religion the Roman governor places Christianity under the protection of Rome by declaring it to be simply a dispute among the Jews. It is without question that this decision by this Roman governor gave the young and vulnerable church time to get established throughout the Roman Empire before it ran into the official denunciation and persecution that happened under the Roman Emperor Nero 12 years after this. Luke's point in telling this story is to demonstrate how the Lord kept his promise to Paul that no one would attack him and so bring him harm. God sovereignly ruled over this Roman governor, causing him to rule in favor of Paul. As we are told in the OT, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." Jesus protected Paul, just as he promised, by directing the heart of this "king".

Why does God, through Luke, include v. 17? What is the point of telling us that Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue gets beat up following Gallio's dismissal of the charges against Paul? We don't know who beats him up or why they do so. It is either the anti-Semitic Gentiles beating up a Jewish leader or it is the Jewish people beating up one of their own who has converted to Christianity. We simply are not told who or why. However, what we are told is that the Roman governor sees this act of violence and does nothing about it. This is the point that God wants us to see. What did Gallio tell the Jews about himself in v. 14? He told them that he was a judge who would give justice in the case of a violent crime. Yet, here he ignores a violent crime. He does not exercise his power to defend the weak as he said he would do. The point God is making is this: while he rules over governors and can work through them to protect his church, the church should not make it a practice to use the government to advance the cause of Christ as the government is not trustworthy. The power of the state is not the power we depend upon to promote the cause of Christ, even though God, in his wisdom may choose on occasion to use the state to help the church. The kingdom of God is not and never can be advanced through political means. It advances always and only through the faithful proclamation of the word of God by local churches living under the authority of that word.

Another issue that God's promise to protect Paul and then his actually protecting him raises is this: why does Jesus do this for Paul here and not in Lystra or Thessalonica or Philippi? Why does he not promise to keep him safe in these other cities but he does here? The answer to that question is, we don't know. God, in his infinite wisdom, determined that Paul being beat up and thrown into prison in Philippi was the best thing for Paul and for his people in Philippi but here God knows that the best thing is for Paul to be kept from harm so he can preach the gospel freely for a full year and a half. Since God keeps Paul from harm here he certainly could have done so in Philippi. The devil and human beings are not in charge of what happens. God is in charge of what happens. Therefore the harm that came to Paul there in Philippi is according to God's will. God didn't cause Paul to get beat up but his getting beat up was exactly what God wanted to happen. He didn't force the mob to beat up Paul and Silas. They did exactly what they wanted to do but in beating up Paul and Silas, they did exactly what God wanted to happen.

God is in charge of what happens to us and whether we are protected from harm in this world or not. Our heavenly Father, according to his wisdom and love is ordaining the circumstances of our lives for our eternal joy and for his own glory. God is at work protecting his church according to his own wisdom and plan so that the word of the Lord goes out into the world saving all God's people.

God exercises his power on behalf of his word by...

- *Providing for his messengers*
- *Pronouncing judgment on those who reject it*
- *Preserving his people by it*
- *Protecting it according to his own wisdom*

© Copyright 2009 John Swanson. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that:

(1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and (4) you do not make more than 1,000 copies. If you would like to post this material to the web, or if your intended use is other than outlined above, please contact River Hills Community Church, 2843 West Court Street, Janesville, WI 53548. (608) 758-0943. mail@riverhillsonline.org