

Gamma

Acts 18

Study 16 Mission to Corinth

Leaders Guide

- 1. Compare Paul's choice of ministry sites with 16:12, and what you recall from the rest of the book of Acts. What kinds of places does he give priority? Why? What impact should that have on Christians today?**

What kinds of places? Paul's pattern is extremely clear. In Acts 16:9-10, Paul is called in a dream to preach in Macedonia. In 16:12 we are told that he went then to Phillipi. Why? Because it was "the leading city of that district of Macedonia". By going to Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Paul is choosing to go the biggest and most influential cities in every location. When he was done planting a church in a major city, he left the region, considering his work finished there. It is clear that Paul's mission was almost completely an urban ministry. He concentrated completely on cities and passed over the countryside and smaller towns. Why? The conscious reasons Paul had for going to cities is a bit speculative, but we have a degree of certainty about at least one. Paul had learned that the most strategic and receptive population to the gospel were the "God-fearers", Gentiles who had come to believe in the God of the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, they were more open than many Jews to the gospel, because they did not have their moral pride. On the other hand, they were more open than many Gentile pagans, because they had the basics of a true understanding of the nature of God as holy and gracious. And when God-fearers became Christians, they were natural "relational bridges" to the broader Gentile population. To find synagogues and Jews and God-fearers, Paul had to go to the cities. Others have pointed out the tremendous advantages of evangelism in the city over towns and country.

- 1) City people are less conservative and set in their ways, and therefore are more open to new ideas like the gospel.
- 2) City people are more mobile and therefore converts in the city soon becomes little core groups in new cities, creating natural bridges for ministry.
- 3) City people are diverse culturally and racially, and therefore conversions in a city bring the gospel quickly into dozens of new language groups and cultural groupings.
- 4) Cities are the seat of media, learning, and culture, and therefore converts in the city have influence over the whole society (while converts in small towns only have influence in small towns). Wayne Meeks, historian at Yale, says that by 300 A.D. half of the populations of the cities of the Roman Empire were Christian, though the countryside was pagan. But, as we know, "as the city goes, so goes society", so the Roman world

very quickly became a Christian civilization. What does it mean for us? It means that, in general, the most strategic place for Christians to live and work and minister is large cities. This is not a law for everyone, just a general truth for the church at large.

John Stott puts it rather pointedly: “In 1850 there were only four ‘world class cities’ of more than a million inhabitants; in 1980 there were 225, and by the year 2,000 there may be 500. In 1980, 40% of the world’s population are city-dwellers; by the end of the century the ratio will be more like one-half... On the one hand, there is an urgent need for Christian planners and architects, local government politicians, urban specialists, developers and community social workers, who will work for justice, peace, freedom and beauty in the city. On the other, Christians need to move into the cities, and experience the pains and pressures of living there, in order to win city-dwellers for Christ. Commuter Christianity (living in salubrious suburbia and commuting to an urban church) is not substitute for incarnational involvement.” — Stott, p.292-293

2. vv.1-18. Notice the distinct stages in the Corinthian mission. What were they? What led to each move to a new stage? What obstacles did he meet at each stage, how did he respond each time, and how did God respond each time?

The first stage could be called the “tentmaking” phase from vv.1-4. During this time, Paul was not in full-time ministry. He worked at a craft and only did ministry in the synagogue on the Sabbath, evangelizing Jews and God-fearers (v.4). The reasons for tent-making included a simple need for funds, as v.5 shows. But Paul’s additional reasons for tentmaking in some situations he notes in Acts 20:33-34 (to avoid any appearance of greed) and in I Thess. 2:9 (to avoid burdening the people he is trying to reach). Obstacle: During this time the ministry moved slowly, as is obvious from the lack of response, negative or positive. Paul did not have a lot of time to give, and he had little in the way of fellowship and partnership. How did he respond? Note the word “trying” in v.4. He simply persisted faithfully at the same approach. God’s encouragement: But God sends help in the form of fellowship.

The second stage began when Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia (and Philippi). This led to Paul going “full time” — “Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying...” What led to this great move forward? Probably three things. a) The encouragement of fellowship — having his friends and fellow workers with him, b) the help of a financial gift (which is not mentioned here, but is noted in Phil.4:14ff. and II Cor.11:8-9), and c) probably the good news about how the converts were flourishing in the new churches Paul had left behind (see I Thess.3:6). This is a great testimony to the importance of fellowship and sharing of love, burdens, and resources for the spread of the gospel. Obstacle: Though as usual, some Jews believed, Jewish leaders rose up to oppose Paul’s preaching (v.6). How did he respond? This time he changed venues and approaches completely. God’s encouragement: And God then blesses this new method richly.

The third stage began when he moved from the public ministry in the synagogue to a private home. Titius Justus was a “God-fearer” (v.7). Paul began meetings in his home, very much like home outreach meetings have been conducted over the years — ministering to the friends and relatives and neighbors of the householder. This approach was very fruitful (v.8), and there was a great evangelistic harvest of new converts. Obstacle: Interestingly enough, a new “obstacle” appears here (we will look more at it under the next question). Paul seems to need a special vision because he was experiencing an unusual amount of fear and discouragement. God’s encouragement: God’s vision is a personal counseling session for Paul.

The fourth stage appears to be a long-term discipling ministry. v.11 tells us that Paul stayed a year and a half “teaching them the word of God”. This means that Paul did a very long term educational ministry, grounding all the new converts in the Word. This is an unusually long time for Paul to stay. Some of the reason for this may have been due to the unusually dark spiritual atmosphere in Corinth, and, perhaps, the need for Paul to “heal” from a dark spiritual depression of his own.

Obstacle: The Jewish leaders decide to make a formal attack on Paul, charging him before the proconsul with disobeying the Roman law. God’s encouragement: Gallio’s retort that this had to do with “your own law” (v.15) was a great success for Paul. Why? Judaism was a religion legally approved and protected in the Roman Empire. (“Judaism was a *religiocita*, [an authorized religion], but Paul’s Jewish opponents refused to recognize the gospel he preached as having anything to do with their ancestral faith... it was, they urged, a *religio illicita*.” (F.F.Bruce)

The Jews were trying to make a case that Paul was teaching a new religion that was not authorized, but Gallio clearly rules that this was an “intramural” debate: “it involves questions about words and names and your own law — settle the matter yourselves.” (v.15) This extended to Christianity the Roman protection given to Judaism, marking it as a close “cousin” or outgrowth of Judaism. This was a triumph for the Christians, and that is why we read that, as a result of this incident, Paul remained in Corinth for some time (v.18). Note: v.17 is a bit confusing, because we are not sure who “they all” refers to. But it probably means the a mob of Gentile onlookers turned and beat the synagogue head. This is, sadly, a typical example of ethnic hostilities in general and the anti-Semitism in particular. The mob took the opportunity of a negative ruling against the Jews to vent their hatred, and Gallio looked the other way.

3. vv.8-11. What is surprising about the emotional condition of Paul in v.9 in light of v.8? Should it be surprising? Why would Paul find ministry in Corinth so difficult (cf. I Cor. 2:2-3)? How does God respond to him?

What is surprising? Should it be? In v.8 there is a huge influx of new converts after a long time of patient but unfruitful work (v.4). We would expect that Paul would be A) confident and b) encouraged. Instead, v.9 indicates that he was so a) afraid and b) discouraged that he was ready to give up and quit. This seems to be counter-intuitive, but this rings very true to experience. (And it is one of the reasons that we know Luke could not have made this up!) Many people who have experienced great periods of success (especially “spiritual success”) after a dry period often find that they do not respond emotionally with joy but with depression. Even Jesus, after the “high” of his baptism and the manifestation of the open heavens — was immediately set upon by the devil in the wilderness. This is not at all an unusual order of things.

Why would Paul have been discouraged? The fear does seem unusual, because Paul has faced even greater physical danger elsewhere. There are at least two reasons that Paul could have experienced such discouragement in the wake of the conversions.

First, of all, Paul tells us in I Cor. 2:2-3 that he came to Corinth in an unusual amount of “fear and trembling”. This was probably because of the reputation Corinth had for spiritual darkness. Like Kuala Lumpur, it was filled with very proud, confident, tough, hard, sophisticated, and immoral people who were quite proud of being everything on that list! There was no place in the Empire, not even Rome, where there was more bald-faced corruption. Second, the long period of unfruitful ministry, maybe combined with the long months and years of Paul’s missionary journeys, may have led him to a “burn out” moment. Often, though overwork, a person becomes drained of any real satisfaction in what he or she is doing. Often when “success” comes, the person suddenly realizes that he/she is too tired, numb, and hardened to enjoy it. Of course, there may have been other reasons that Luke does not let us in on.

How does God respond to him? God’s vision is a kind of counseling session, an encouragement. And before anyone thinks “I wish I had that kind of help from God” we should realize that God’s message is almost completely just the repeating of promises already in the Old Testament. “Do not be afraid” and “I am with you” are continually being said to his people by the Lord. (For example, look up Gen. 26:24; Jer. 1:8ff). This means that God can speak to us in the same encouraging way when he takes Scriptural promises and, through the Spirit, makes them “come alive” as if they were being spoken just to us. In other words, Paul is exhorted by the Word of God in his moment of crisis. See Heb. 12:5-6 to see how the Scripture continues to be a way for God to exhort and counsel us.

4. Collect and list all the ways that God's help and encouragement comes to us. What can we learn from a) Paul's actions and b) God's directions (in v.9-10) about how we can receive God's help ourselves?

God's help comes in at least these forms:

a) First, it can come through Christian friends and fellowship (v.5) Even the St. Paul, arguably the greatest Christian leader and preacher who ever lived besides the Lord himself, could not "pull off" the Corinthian mission all by himself, without co-workers, fellowship, emotional and financial support. Some of us face problems and refuse to get human help, rationalizing that "I should be able to face this just with God", but in reality there is a cowardice or a pride that makes us try to go it alone. This text shows us that one of the main ways God gives us what we need is through other Christians. We must not tell God what channels he is allowed to send his help!

b) Second, it can come through the Spirit working through the Word. (v.9-10) Many of us need a "word of exhortation" from God at certain times. We have just said that we must not cut ourselves off from community, but now we see we must also "get alone with God" and put in the time in prayer and reflection necessary for him to comfort us.

c) Third, it can come through "providential" protection and success. Just as God opened people's hearts (v.8) and guided Gallio's thoughts (v.15). This is usually the main and first way that we expect and want God's help! We want him to reach down and change other people's minds and hearts. We want him to overrule circumstances and make history go in a particular way. But we should remember that he did not do that for Paul right away (v.4) and in many ways, we have no control over this particular means. Rather, we should go to Christian friends, and to God in prayer, a) and b) above. We do have control over that.

From Paul's actions in vv. 1-18 we learn:

a) Sometimes the only way through obstacles (as in the first stage of mission, vv.1-4) is faithfulness, patient "plodding" along, and waiting on God for relief, but

b) other times (as in the second stage, vv.5-8) it is best to be aggressive and take a whole different approach! Some will be confused and say, "but how do you know which situation is which?" That of course takes wisdom, but it also takes the confidence that comes from meditating on the promises and directions of God in v.9-10. In other words, we should not be paralyzed with fear, when we consider whether to "patiently plod" or change directions. We make our decision even if we are not sure, because we remember what this whole passage has taught us, namely, that God is supervising things and will help us, though that help can come in all sorts of times and all sorts of shapes.

From God's directions in v.9-10 we learn:

God first of all tells Paul: do not be afraid". How can that be a command? It is best not to think of this as a separate command from what follows. You do not have to try to directly stop yourself from feeling the feeling of fear. Rather, we should understand that God is saying, "you will not be afraid if you do the following things". What are those things? He tells Paul to:

a) Do something. "Keep on speaking". Here is a command to do an act of the will. God is telling Paul to open his mouth and share the gospel despite his fears.

b) Remember something. There are two things that God calls Paul to remember if he is to get his courage back:

(1) "For I am with you". The word "for" means that Paul is not simply to speak out, but to speak out remembering and meditating on the fact that God is with him. Of course, the very experience of the vision brought Paul a vivid sense of God's presense. So we are to take this as a direction to seek a sense of God's presense.

(2) Secondly, he says "no one is going to attack and harm you" which is a reminder that God is lord of history and nothing will happen that is not for God's glory and Paul's benefit — this a Romans 8:28 sort of assurance. Notice how later in the chapter Paul attributes everything that happens to "God's will" (see 18:21), and how Luke offhandedly remarks that people only believe or are converted "by grace." (18:27) c) See something. "I have many people in this city". This is the most remarkable direction of all. Paul is told not to look at Corinth as full of enemies, but full of friends. God is saying that he has many people he intends to call to himself, and Paul is to see the city through God's eyes — filled with potential and future children of God. God wants to use Paul and protect Paul for their sake. So should we look at our city! Introduction to the the end of the second missionary journey: vv.18-23 is a very compact, condensed summary of the latter part and conclusion of Paul's "second missionary journey". Don't spend much time on v.18! No one is really sure what the vow was nor even who it was that made it. The main matter of importance is our introduction to the formidable Christian leader, Apollos.

5. In what ways can you be an encouragement to your group or others in the church ?

(Open Discussion)