

Acts Chapter 18

Corinth was a big place of debauchery. Back then actually Corinth has a synonym for fornication and actually became a synonym for fornication probably so much debauchery was going on and they had temple prostitutes, the temple of Aphrodite was there. They had thousands over of temple prostitutes going around there. It was a big metropolitan for a lot of business to go on there, sailors were coming in, and it was a pathway for businesses as well, so all kinds of people, sailors who haven't seen women for a long time will come into that city. It was the city of the Olympics as well. Corinth was a big Olympic town as well. So I guess there are a lot of people wrestling with one another back then, they wrestle naked. So a lot of emotions came up there. It was a big town just kind of like KL where a lot of debauchery was going on, it was a big city where there was a lot of business going on. It was a cultural metropolitan, so this is why this is the kind of city that Paul was going into and you guys might ask the question, why is he going to those kinds of cities. Well, because they are influential, business people who were there and there are people from all kinds of places coming to the city. So, if you spread the gospel to big cities and able to influence those big cities then the gospel can spread outwardly from those cities as well. So there are couple of reasons we can see back then why people would go to big cities.

Reasons to Reach City

- ✓ City people are less conservative. They are not set in their ways and therefore are more open to new ideas like the gospel. Rural areas are usually fundamentally run by people who want to follow tradition. Tradition is very important in rural areas. In big cities the important thing is its innovation. So innovation wants to have new ideas, new concepts. So people are open to new things whereas in rural areas people like it more traditionally and have their set ways. So that is one reason why back then and even today we want to reach the big cities for Jesus.
- ✓ City people are more mobile and therefore converts in the city soon become little cell groups in new cities, creating natural bridges for ministries, because people in cities they travel a lot more, they are not just stationary in their little place. So they become agents of the gospel to move around.
- ✓ City people are diverse culturally and racially and therefore conversions in a city bring the gospel quickly into dozens of new languages, groups and cultural groupings. Today in Kuala Lumpur we have now thousands of people group alone of different types of people group, which is just an opportunity for us to reach the gospel for so many nations in the city and the great thing is if we start spreading the gospel in the city immediately people from all over the world are in the city and we are spreading it and they will go out from that city back to their places and the gospel will spread in that way.
- ✓ Cities are a seat of media, learning culture and therefore converts in the city have influence over the whole society. Converts in small town only have influence in small towns. Some historian made a research and say by 300 AD half of the population of the cities of the Roman Empire were Christian, though the countryside

was pagan but as they were going through the cities later on the Roman Empire was really-really quickly changed for Christ, they became a Christian empire as well. So from 300 just few hundred years down the line half of the Roman Empire was a Christian nation but it started on with the cities and then later on the culture influenced the places around the city. So it is very important that we go into places and spread the gospel in the place which has cultural influences. We know today that Kuala Lumpur has a cultural influence over the rest of Malaysia. Whatever cultures are set, whatever businesses are set and how media is being portrayed, how businesses run in Kuala Lumpur will set a trend for the rest of Malaysia. So the same thing back then Paul went to the big cities to be able to see big cities changed for the gospel to be media and trend setters for the rest of the region at that area.

Back then there was about less than 5 cities which had about more than million people living in them during this time of 50 AD and Corinth was a city which have 750,000 people roughly at that point of time. So you can just see how Paul was going from these big cities and he went to Rome, he went to Athens. So this was kind of his mission ground that he has found important and still relevant for us today.

How did Paul do that?

From the text we can see that there is kind of four different stages of his ministry that he had there. He started off by tent making.

1. Tent Making Phase:

It was the phase where he was pretty much working. So he was not a fulltime minister, he had a job going on. Many of you guys here you have a corporate job going on and at the same time you do ministry. Paul was working and he was doing ministry on the evening time or on the Saturdays in the synagogues. That is another reason why he went to the cities is because there were synagogues there and he was primarily focused at the beginning on reaching out to Jewish people and God fearers who will be found in the synagogue. There won't be a synagogue in every single place, there had to be a certain number of Jewish men to be present to be able in the synagogue, so he had to go to the bigger places to be able to meet people in the synagogue. So he use to go to synagogues and that is the kind of teaching ministry that he had at that point of time and it was not too fruitful, because he couldn't spend his entire time teaching and preaching because he had to work at the same time. Some obstacles happened during this time. His ministry moved slowly as obvious from lack of response, negative and positive and then Paul didn't have lot of time to give and he had little way of fellowship and partnership. But God gave him encouragement. God sent help in form of fellowship to him. Eventually we can see he went to the house of Priscilla and Aquila and he went there and they shared the same trade. So he had a bit of fellowship with them. I think it is very encouraging when we come alongside people in our lives who are kindred spirit, who understand us, who understand our businesses and that also engage for the ministry as well, so God kind of give him encouragement in that way.

2. More support came in face of Silas and Timothy.

Silas and Timothy who came from Macedonia probably from Philippi and this led to kind of Paul going fulltime. So he had friends who came to support in ministry is phase 2 and Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching and testifying. There are couple of reasons why we can see this happened. First, because of the encouragement and fellowship of having friends and fellow workers coming together alongside doing the work and then secondly is because financial gifts were given, he had the finances to be able to do so. So it does not say in this text but from other text in the Bible we know at this point of time he was given finances, so he didn't have to work anymore. In other books in the Bible there were reasons given of why Paul did tent making. Why he did a fulltime job? There are couple of reasons.

- He needed the money.
- A lot of time he didn't want people to think that he was greedy that he needed their money.
- He didn't want to burden the people that he was reaching out to. This is kind of like a strategy we do for church planting as well. When we plant a new church somewhere we don't necessarily go there and preach tithing. Especially when reaching out to new Christian, the whole point is not for you to come and give me money, the whole point for us is to give you the gospel that is the main point. Later on as well he would beget support from other cities and as he get support from other cities from other text we read as well, he is going to ask the Corinthian church to also provide finances just like other churches have provided finances to them as well. So that will come later on.

Probably the good news about the convert of flourishing in the church Paul has left behind. So he got some good news about the work was going on. So that kind of give him encouragement and that is why he had another boost to continue doing the work.

The obstacles as always usual, some Jews believed, Jewish leaders rose up to opposition to Paul's preaching and how did he respond?

This time he changed venues and the approach completely. So he stopped preaching in the synagogue and the encouragement came through the fact that God kind of blessed his new methods that he was going about.

3. He began house church.

It is kind of small group, house church kind of ministry. So from public ministry in a synagogue to private home he began meetings at home. His approach was very fruitful. There was great evangelistic harvest of new converts but the interesting thing which we would talk about shortly after this is what happened to him, he got discouraged. He had a different kind of obstacle that came and goes. It is kind of like a personal obstacle that came upon him.

God's encouragement came. God gave him a vision and personal counseling session to Paul so that happened that God kind of came into the picture and kind of comforted Paul there as well.

4. Long-term disciples ministry

It tells that Paul stayed a year and a half teaching them the word of God that means Paul did a very long-term educational ministry grounding all the new converts in the word. It is very important that means after he was going out, different strategies, preaching the gospel, going out and then becoming a fulltime worker, continue preaching more, starting small groups and house churches and after more converts started coming he started heavily discipling for one and half year, because the great commission is not just go out and proclaim the gospel, it is go out, proclaim the gospel and make disciples. So he focused on that completely as well for one and half years. He went out and he made disciples. Obstacles came because the Jewish leaders decided to make a formal attack against him. They charged him before the proconsul with disobeying the Roman law and God kind of worked in that as well by having Galileo retort that, it has nothing to do with the Roman law which is great because the Jewish religion back then was as sanctified religion by the Roman law and by Galileo saying that it is okay, it is part of the Jewish religion, then Christian immediately became a legal protected religion as well. So that was great because there was uprising coming.

We are here going through these four stages and then many of us here who might be in different parts of those four stages and I am not saying that all of us are necessarily called to do all four parts. Not all of us are called to do fulltime ministry, I think all of us are called to do some stage of this kind of ministry. May be we are called while we are vocationally working somewhere then to do ministry. We can be an agent to the gospel to see what kind of ministries that we can do to shape the culture of Christianity here in Malaysia as well. So we have to see how we can come alongside in that mission. Some of us are sitting here who might be called to do more than that; some of us might be called here to come to fulltime ministry as well. Paul at that time had the finances by the support of church to do the ministry.

God Comforts His People:

There is something great that we can learn from this chapter about how God deals with his people. Paul was having a burnout. In the text we can see that God kind of appear to him and said, do not be afraid. Continue doing the good work, keep on speaking, keep on doing the work. In 2-Corinthians Paul writes about his missionary journeys, he writes about how he was traveling and the kind of things that he was facing and the struggles he was facing as well. He was having this kind of burnout at the point of time where many conversions were coming. So it is not that he was depressed, it was something that happened in his spirit that kind of got him down. When we have been working and working on a project or in your jobs, even when the rewards come you cannot sit and enjoy them, you are just too tired. You are burned out, you are stressed out. That is kind of how Paul was at that point of time. He was just working and I think in the city here we have a lot of people who are working until that level. You are just working and working day in and day out because your employers ask it from you or may be because the nature of your job just requires that as well and you know how it feels like to just working and being tired and not being to able to enjoy the benefits and the good things that come out.

We can see how tough it was for Paul in 2-Cor 11:

24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. **25** Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; **26** on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; **27** in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. **28** And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

That what Paul was going through, not all of this has happened at that point of time yet. Part of these things have not happened yet but a lot of things had happened already because he is writing from a later point of view to 2-Corinthians, but this was the kind of ministry that Paul was going through. So we can understand even though lots of converts are coming, sometimes you can get a bit discouraged facing all this kind of opposition. So there are couple of things that we can learn from how God speaks to us and how God comforts us in these kinds of situations.

God did couple of things for Paul at that time.

He provided him community through Priscilla and family and then through Timothy and Silas. It is so important that you have in a community in your life that can get behind you and be with you to live life with and this is a Christian community that supports you and encourages you through in tough times.

Another way for God speaking through us. In this passage here it says.

9 And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, **10** for I am with you,...

So God kind of spoke to Paul in that difficult time to him. We don't hear God's audible voice now, but we do have God's word in scripture and whatever promises that were given to Paul, are the same promises hold on to us today as well. That is the great thing that we do have God's word revealed to us and as we are digging into God's word and reading God's word it comforts us, the spirit comforts us as well and then when we have passages that we can just cling on to and hold onto in our lives. Things that just help us not to lose heart and they comfort us in times of trouble and they speak to us as well. So we do have God's word and he speaks to us and comforts us. So this is the second way that God comforts us in difficult times.

What do we do when we face struggles?

When Paul was facing this struggle what was he asked to do. God said, , “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, **10** for I am with you,...

One of the biggest commandment, the most frequent commandment given by God in the whole of scripture is this, do not be afraid, do not fear. If we look through the Old Testament and New Testament, it always start, do not fear because He is with us. This is the promise that he gives us as well. He says, we should do something, we continue doing the work that we have been called to do now. So whether we continue doing the same thing or start changing strategy like Paul changed strategies I think it is a matter of discernment. Different situations might call for different actions, sometimes it is good to continue on and be patient and sometimes it is good to change strategy and that is why we have community and we have other people to discuss this with as well. So we do something.

Secondly is we remember something. He said here, I am with you.

As you remember who God is, if you remember who God is and what he has done for us, I mean that he sent his son to die for us on the cross. We know he is a good father who only give us good gifts, so remember on who God is and what he has done for us and that gives us strength and again the best way to remember this is go back into scripture and have friends encouraging you about these things as well.

Thirdly, see something.

If we look around the city, we see people who are dying. They are dying of eternal death and if we look and we start loving the city and the people we will get new strength to continue doing the work and the mission for God. We have to look out for the people who are in need, who have never heard the gospel. Anyone of us here today are here because somebody shared the gospel with us. We are saved today because somebody felt the need to continue, some missionary came to Malaysia one day, somebody went through the streets of Melaka, somebody did the hard work, somebody continued even if it was difficult. I remember my friend sharing the gospel with me; it was difficult to get me to believe in Jesus. I was not easy but somebody pressed on, somebody continued doing, somebody saw the need to share the gospel and we got to see that need. Paul saw that need, he saw why he has difficulties and why his struggles matter. In the same book that we read just now when he talks about how he was shipwrecked and how all these terrible things happened to him. In the same book when he opens up in 2-Corinthians he talks about how he found the comfort and how that comfort helped him to continue going out and doing this and I will read this from 2-Corinthians 1:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, **4** who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

We receive comfort from God in our affliction, why, so that we can go out and comfort other people who had a similar affliction as well. There is a reason that we are going through our difficult times, it is sometimes we are able to reach out and share the gospel with those people who do not know the gospel.

5 For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. **6** If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your

comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. **7** Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. **8** For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. **9** Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. **10** He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. **11** You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. **12** For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. **13** For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand— **14** just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

He saw that his work and his suffering would affect people and that would be able to then bring comfort to the people and as they are suffering for the same cause they are able to bring comfort to others. He was seeing the greater cause of his mission. He was seeing the greater cause of his pain and he is seeing a greater cause of his suffering and how that will bring change through the city. This is what Paul was saying.

So when we face struggles we connect to small groups, we continue speaking out the gospel, we continue doing the good work. We remember what God has done for us. We remember that who he is that he is God almighty that he is with us always and we do not have to fear and that we see something, we see the need for reaching out to lost people and then we do the last thing we press on. We can continue doing that work and as we continue doing that work God will comfort us. He will find a way through his word or through community to give us strength, to eventually see the need for the city.