

## “GO ON SPEAKING”

Acts 18:1–22

Key Verse: 18:9

“And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent...’”

Do you ever feel trapped, overwhelmed, or just wiped out? Like what you’re doing may make no difference? Are there times you just want to quit and get out? In today’s passage even Apostle Paul was feeling something like this. But he’s encouraged to go on. We see in this passage the kinds of encouragement God gives him. But the focus is on the words of the Risen Jesus to him. How do his words to Paul help us? May God speak to us today.

On this trip Paul tried to go to Asia Minor. But the Spirit of Jesus did not allow him. Through a vision at night, the Lord called Paul and his team to Macedonia (16:6–7). But when he obeyed and went there, Paul had a hard time. In every city—Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea—Paul was basically driven out. After a relatively brief time he had to leave Macedonia and go to Athens. By himself in Athens,<sup>1</sup> he challenged the people to repent of their idolatry, then left. In all four places, gospel ministry had barely gotten started.

Corinth is place #5, about 50 miles west of Athens. It takes at least a couple of days to walk there. Its population is ten times larger than Athens. It’s a city on an isthmus with two ports, one goes east and the other, west. In ancient Greece, Corinth was a major city. Corinthian wealth, bronze, columns, and immorality were legendary. But about 200 years prior to Paul, when Corinth supported a rebellion against Rome, it was totally destroyed. After the site was abandoned for 100 years, Julius Caesar had the city rebuilt. The Roman army, the wealthy, and slaves from all over the empire started moving to Corinth to begin a new life. It became a boomtown, with new buildings, streets, shops, and a thriving economy. The people were rootless immigrants, but some were ambitious and made good money. It quickly rose to again become a city known for wealth and immorality. Now it’s the capital of the Roman province Achaia.

Paul shows up in Corinth alone, without coworkers and without funds. What does he do? He finds a Jew named Aquila (2). Aquila is originally from Pontus, on the shores of the Black Sea, but he’s recently come from Rome to Corinth with his wife Priscilla.<sup>2</sup> Aquila and Priscilla are likely Christian Jews. Paul

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<sup>1</sup> Later Timothy actually came to help Paul in Athens, but Paul was so worried about the new believers in Thessalonica he sent him back there (1 Thess.3:1–5).

<sup>2</sup> Claudius, the current Roman Emperor, had commanded all Jews to leave the city because of controversies over someone called “Chrestos,” or Christ (Suetonius, *Divas Claudius* 25.4).

may've heard of them through "the Diaspora Jewish grapevine." Now he finds them and goes to see them. Why? Look at verse 3. Really, he needs a job and a place to stay. Unlike philosophers in Athens, Paul doesn't ask for speaking fees; his lifestyle is not supported by wealthy relatives or donors. When he was young, he trained to work as a tentmaker to support himself. It's likely Paul worked as a tentmaker in Thessalonica, too. There, he and his team "worked night and day" so as not to be a "burden" while they proclaimed the gospel (1 Thess.2:9; 2 Thess.3:8). In Ephesus as well, Paul will work with his own hands to provide for his own needs and those with him (20:34).

Now in Corinth, he stays with Aquila and Priscilla and works. Most likely their shop is among others near the main market. Archaeologists have found these shops in Corinth: each one is 13 feet high, long and wide, with a 7.5 foot door opening. A couple would live in a small loft area; on the main floor there would be workbenches and places for storing materials. Paul probably sleeps in a small closet in the back. "Tentmaking" is most likely "leathermaking," as leather tents were most popular at the time.<sup>3</sup> To earn a living like this is an intense life, working six days a week, 12 hours a day. Toiling with one's hands, all day long, day after day, must've felt like slavery.<sup>4</sup> But Paul was willing to humble himself to live like this so he could share the gospel with the Corinthians free of charge (2 Cor.11:7). While working, no doubt these three could talk in the shop daily. Aquila and Priscilla could share what's going on in Rome. Paul could share what's been happening through his ministry. And they could pray. While working and sharing life together, they must've bonded. Paul likely began conversations with customers about Jesus. This couple could see Paul's spiritual gift of explaining the gospel, and they could begin praying for him.<sup>5</sup> Living and working with this couple was God's encouragement to Paul.

Look at verse 4. On his one day off, Paul must be dog tired, but he gets right to work in the synagogue, reasoning and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks that the Christ is Jesus (5b). Soon things change. Look at verse 5a. Silas and Timothy bring material support from the church in Philippi (2 Cor.11:8–9), so Paul can suspend working as a tentmaker for a while. So now he's "occupied with the word"—intensely focused on it, absorbed by it. "The word" is the good news of Jesus, in all its aspects. Paul is explaining it to the Jews of Corinth every day. Maybe they meet at the shop, or in the synagogue, or both.

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<sup>3</sup> Every other year, on the narrow strip of land nearby, Corinth was once again hosting the ancient sports event called the Isthmian Games, which likely was a significant part of the local market for leather tents.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, 3rd Edition (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), pp.192–98.

<sup>5</sup> After life together in Corinth, Paul takes them and drops them off in Ephesus (18–19); later, the couple is in Rome again (Rom.16:3–5a). In his last letter, the couple is in Ephesus (2 Tim.4:19; cf. 1:16–18; 4:12). They may have run at least three local branches of tentmaking: in Rome, Corinth and Ephesus.

And what's the response? In the end they oppose and revile him (6a). It's heart-breaking. Why do they do this? We find out in Paul's letters. They say Paul's bodily presence is weak, and his speech is of no account (2 Cor.10:10). They judge him by worldly standards (1 Cor.1:26). They don't trust his motives (2 Cor.12:16–18). They especially don't like that he's saying the Christ is crucified Jesus who supposedly rose from the dead. Paul loves his own people, the Jews. But when they revile him to discredit the true gospel, he takes decisive action. He shakes out his garments and says, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles" (cf. Eze.33:4). And right next door to the synagogue is the house of a Gentile, Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. He welcomes Paul in (6–7), another encouragement. Then what? Look at verse 8. It's unusual for a synagogue ruler to accept the gospel. Crispus and his entire household believe in Jesus. The synagogue members next door must be humiliated. And it's just the start. Many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believe and are baptized. Yet again, when the Jews reject the gospel, the Gentiles accept it (13:46). Paul is following the principle of our Lord Jesus: when people reject us, move on and keep looking for those who are open (Luke 10:5–11).

Working with Priscilla and Aquila, the coming of Silas and Timothy to Corinth, Titius Justus and Crispus, these other new believers—they all encourage Paul. But deep within, he's still struggling. He needs more than human help; he needs to meet God again. Based on recent events, his condition is understandable. Lydia, the jailer and their households accepted Jesus, but Paul was driven out. Jason accepted Jesus and opened his home to the team, but they were driven out again. The Bereans were eager to receive the word, but in the end, yet again Paul was driven out. In Thessalonica and Berea, the Jews were the ones who did the driving out. And now Paul is teaching in a house right next door to a Jewish synagogue that opposes and reviles him.

One night, the Lord speaks to him in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent." How can he go on speaking? Later Paul wrote that he came to Corinth not "with lofty speech or wisdom," but "in weakness and in fear and much trembling" (1 Cor.2:1,3). How could he overcome his weakness and fear? People think Paul looks like a menial laborer and have been treating him so badly. But the Risen Jesus is with him. It's the same Jesus who went to the cross but rose again. It's the living Jesus, the Lord of all, with all power to protect and defend his servants. It's this Jesus telling Paul, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent." We learn several things here.

**First**, obey God's will. Read verses 9–10. Ministry in Corinth may not be where Paul wants to stay. It's an intimidating, corrupt, hard place. But Paul doesn't get to pick where to serve; the Lord Jesus does. The Lord Jesus appears to him and

tells him not to leave this time, but stay. Staying where Jesus wants us, for as long as he wants, is the foundation of being useful to God.

**Second**, depend on Jesus. Read verse 10a. Paul has to go on speaking next door to the synagogue where they oppose and revile him. Why doesn't Jesus make this any easier? It's to reveal the glory and surpassing power of the gospel. Later Paul writes, "For God...has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God, not to us" (2 Cor.4:6–7). In himself Paul has no strength to go on. But through this vision God fills Paul with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, the light of knowing Jesus himself. This is his greatest treasure in his body, his jar of clay. Like Paul, sometimes Jesus puts us in hard situations, but he gives us the light knowing him, his very presence within us. Then he asks us to just rely on him.

**Third**, see the plan. Read verse 10b. What does this mean? Many have just believed and been baptized. But they can't protect Paul; Jesus will. The many "who are my people" really points to those who have not yet accepted the gospel. It's a prophetic revelation to Paul from the Risen Lord Jesus. Paul needs to go on speaking so these people can hear the good news. Currently, these people are unchanged, full of sin, living in a city soaked in all kinds of corruption. But when they repent and believe the gospel, they will be washed, sanctified, and justified by the Spirit (1 Cor.6:9–11). By his amazing grace they will belong to Christ and to his body (1 Cor.3:23; 12:27). God will reveal the amazing things of God to them, through the Spirit, so they will understand the things freely given us by God (1 Cor.2:9–12). They will be empowered to live as Jesus' people and eventually inherit God's kingdom. This is God's plan. It's why God led Paul here, to reach, as Jesus says, "my people."

Reaching the Gentiles is always part of God's plan. In Peter's ministry to Cornelius, "God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name" (15:14). In Pisidian Antioch, even in the midst of jealousy and persecution, "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed" (13:48). "Appointed" means it's been God's plan all along. God chose us in him before the foundation of the world (Eph.1:3). And God is still calling, saving and growing his people among all the nations. The Eternal, Sovereign God is still working out his plan and purpose through Jesus, based on his time schedule, and he'll continue to do so to the end.<sup>6</sup> In fact, before the ages God decreed this for our glory (1 Cor.2:7). Coming to faith in Jesus is not a small thing. It makes each believer someone "on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor.10:11). In Jesus, we become part of God's eternal redemptive history. Right now, God wants to use Paul in Corinth to draw

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<sup>6</sup> 2:20,23; 4:27–28; 17:31.

those he's already been working in, to bring them to faith in Jesus. In fear and discouragement Paul can't see the plan. But Jesus can.

**Fourth**, “go on speaking.” Read verse 9 again. This is today's main point. Frankly, some people talk too much, or for too long. It may seem better to be silent. But Paul is told to go on speaking and not be silent. Why? It's because he's not talking foolishly, or saying reckless, unnecessary things. He's not gossiping or slandering. He's speaking the gospel, how Jesus suffered, died and rose again, according to the Scriptures (1 Cor.15:3–4). He's speaking of repentance, of God's grace we receive through Jesus, of being justified and sanctified by the gift of the Holy Spirit. He's speaking the life-giving word of God, the word of the cross, the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor.1:18). He's speaking of how to live with Jesus as Lord, as part of the body of Christ. He's speaking of how Jesus is coming again as Judge. He's speaking of the deep things of God, so people can have mature spiritual wisdom (1 Cor.2:6; 14:20). He's speaking words “taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (1 Cor.2:13). If Paul goes on speaking, people will be transformed by the gospel's power and be built up in Christ. Today Jesus still calls us to go on speaking his full gospel to the people he brings. If we go on speaking it, overcoming fear and discouragement, God can raise spiritual leaders for the world from among us.

**Fifth**, be secure in Jesus. Paul's ministry has led him from place to place, from hardship to hardship. No matter how hard he works, he's under constant threat. Living like this can wear anybody down. Even Paul needs to be renewed. So the Lord Jesus personally tells him, “I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you.” He's promising to be with him through it all, and not just here in Corinth. In our good shepherd Jesus, as we live by his grace, share his good news and serve him with all our hearts, we have “full assurance” (Heb.6:11). At the very end of Paul's last letter, while he was in prison, he writes: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (2 Tim.4:18). That's real security. By his grace, our Lord Jesus promises even us that he'll be with us now and all the way through, to get us safely to our eternal home. Do you believe this promise?

In the night we may not have a vision of Jesus speaking to us. But we have his word in the Bible. And if we've received Jesus, he's given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee (2 Cor.1:22; 5:5). If we let him, the Spirit helps us obey God's will. The Spirit helps us rely on Jesus. The Spirit helps us see the plan. The Spirit inspires us to go on speaking the life-giving word of the gospel. The Spirit gives us real security in Jesus. Look at verse 11. The Spirit of Jesus enabled Paul to do this. On his mission journeys so far, this is the longest time

he's spent in any place. It's amazing Paul did this for a year and six months, right next to hostile people. God was protecting and quietly using him.

In the last part (12–22) we see how God's promise of protection gets fulfilled, even through the Roman proconsul Gallio, and how Paul fulfills a vow and eventually returns to his home church in Antioch.

So, do you feel discouraged, or fearful, like you're losing your way? How can we get out of this? We need encouraging people around us. But most of all, we need the words, the presence, the knowledge of the living Lord Jesus. Let's read verses 9–10 again. May God encourage us to rely on Jesus and go on speaking his gospel, that his lost people out there may be drawn to him and be saved.