

Sunday November 7th, 2021

Acts 18:1-17

Series: Lessons from the Early Church

Sermon: "Visit to Corinth"

I was wondering today about how good we are at reading the signs. I am not talking about traffic signs, or signs at a supermarket, but rather the "signs of the times". How good are we at seeing things begin to develop, and being able to deduce the inevitable outcome? And I am not talking about apocalyptic signs today. For I ran across a list of some signs that should you see them, you know you are in for a very bad day. Some examples of these signs are as follows.

You receive a phone call from the producers of the Jerry Springer Show, asking if you would like to appear on the show with your spouse. That's a bad sign. Another surefire bad sign is you show up to work, and the television crew from W5 is camped out in the lobby. Another bad sign is you turn on your television, and they are showing the quickest ways to evacuate the city. You know it's going to be a bad day when your twin sister forgets your birthday. Right Wendy?

You know it is going to be a bad day when you arrive at work, and your boss tells you not to bother to take off your coat. Oh, it's a bad day when your check to Revenue Canada bounces. It is really a bad day, when your car horn goes off accidentally, and remains on, blaring away as you follow a group of Hell's Angels. You really know it's going to be a bad day when your daughter's new boyfriend arrives at your home wearing a tracking anklet.

I am sure we could sit here for some time coming up with numerous other examples of signs that you are in for a bad day. One bad day is enough, but when you experience a few in a row, it is tempting to throw in the towel, to give up. Warren Weirsbe in his book, *Be Daring*, tells the story of a man who was out shoveling his driveway after a heavy snowfall. He was about half way clearing his driveway, when two young men approached him carrying shovels.

One of the young men said, "Can we shovel your snow mister? Only two dollars!" Puzzled by the question the man replied, "Can't you see that I am doing it myself and I am already half finished?" "Sure" the one lad said, "that's why we asked. We get most of our business from people who are half way through and feel like quitting." Do you ever feel like quitting? Quitting your job, your marriage, your church, perhaps even your very life?

I think we can agree that nothing is more harmful to the human condition than discouragement, something we talk about often. What I want to tell you today is that we miss a vital lesson from the book of Acts, if we don't see that Paul also struggled with discouragement. We do Paul, and ourselves, a great disservice if we think Paul was somehow superhuman, able to withstand anything without consequences.

Well, I am here to tell you that Paul was just as human as we are, and he experienced the same negative things we do. Nowhere is this made clearer than when he begins his 18 months stay in Corinth. If you think he had an easy time of it in Corinth, I recommend you to read his two letters to this church. The reason I believe Paul was discouraged, despite some early success in Corinth, lays in the need for God to speak to him directly in verse 9. There is no sign greater that we need an intervention, than when God speaks to us directly.

Sunday November 7th, 2021

For Paul himself writes later of his experience in Corinth in one of his letters, “For I was with you in weakness and fear and trembling.” (1 Cor. 2:3) Here is what God said to Paul in our passage today, “Don’t be afraid! Speak out! Don’t be silent! For I am with you, and no one will harm you because many people here in this city belong to me.” Paul was clearly feeling beat up by life, and needed God to intervene; and frankly it is no wonder Paul would feel discouraged. Just look at what he faced.

Having just left Athens, the center of Greek culture and learning, Paul makes his way alone, the 45 miles by foot to the city of Corinth. It is pretty clear that Paul was lonely when he arrives in Corinth; that is until God provides Aquila and Priscilla, two Jewish tent makers who were expelled from Rome. Expelled with all the other Jews, by a decree from the emperor. Yet, until this particular relationship deepens, Paul is feeling utterly alone.

No wonder he needed God to say, “I am with you.” The other contributor to Paul’s discouragement, has to do with the nature of the city of Corinth itself. The best modern example I could come up with, is imagine Wall Street being located in Las Vegas, and you kind of get what Corinth was like. Commerce mixed with the pursuit of pleasure.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, it had become a flourishing center of trade and commerce. Corinth is on an isthmus between the Ionian and Aegean Seas, and to avoid a long sea voyage, boats were, in those days, continually dragged by man and horse, over the land from one sea to the other. Thus, to Corinth, men and ships came from all over the known world. Corinth had merchants, and lots of money, as the main business of the city was trade. That’s the Wall Street part, but Corinth was also know for something else that tainted its reputation, and drew nefarious people from all around the Mediterranean, and that’s the Vegas part.

In Corinth was the massive temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sex and love. At its height of activity, which included Paul’s day, over 1,000 temple prostitutes plied their trade. And there were customers a plenty, as sailors from all over the Mediterranean couldn’t wait to take some shore leave. Something similar to what I remember reading about Bangkok Thailand, where sex trade workers would make sure they knew when American navy vessels would dock, and would make sure they were ready to ply their trade.

Corinth was a hotbed of drunkenness and debauchery. This cesspool of immorality, was made worse by the fact that the people didn’t see anything wrong with what they were doing. The whole thing was sanctioned by the government and religious establishment. Actually, they believed their debauchery was part of their religious duty, in paying homage to Aphrodite. Visiting a temple prostitute was as routine a religious act as our putting in our offering.

This situation in Corinth devastated Paul. Paul saw, through the eyes of God, what was going on in Corinth for what it truly was. He knew that eventually, the pursuit of pleasure and material gain, led to an emptiness in the hearts of people. Such worldly pursuits blinded people to their spiritual need, and Paul was frustrated at trying to reach the populace. And even when people came to faith, it was very hard for them to leave their old lives behind. Just read Paul’s two letters to the church to see for yourself the challenge.

Sunday November 7th, 2021

Perhaps you will remember one such example. Remember the heated debate in the Corinthian church over whether it was morally right for a Christian to eat meat offered to idols. This issue was really ripping the Corinthian church apart. The meat was very tempting, because it was likely the only meat that most people regularly received in their diets. But would God appreciate their eating something offered to idols. Clearly, being new to the faith, the conscience of the Christians in Corinth was unsettled.

Then it gets worse for Paul. Rome, in its bureaucratic brilliance, appointed a man named Gallio to be governor of Achaia, which is the region around Corinth. This information actually helps us date with some accuracy when Paul was actually in Corinth, since Gallio was governor from 51-52 AD. It also means it has now been 20 years since the church at Jerusalem was founded. Scholars have learned a little bit about Gallio and most of it is not flattering.

He was not a mean governor, nor was he overly kind; Gallio in a word was simply indifferent. He didn't care about issues, unless they were related to Roman rule, or commerce, or lining his own pocket. So indifferent, to other concerns was Gallio, that the mob that grabbed Paul, and dragged him before the governor, severely beat Crispus, who was the leader of the synagogue, right in the courtroom. They didn't even wait to get outside, and Gallio paid no attention.

The Jews who hated Paul misjudged Gallio. They thought he could be easily swayed to get rid of Paul, but religious matters like Jewish law, had no value to Gallio. Even before Paul could make his defense, Gallio dismissed the whole matter. So we can see that in Corinth Paul faced: indifference, hostility, immortality, and loneliness. I can guess that at least once, Paul may have wondered why he was there, but I think in his heart he knew the answer.

Yes, of course, God sent him there, but think about why God sent him there. In Corinth, there lived some very sick people, spiritually speaking. Jesus, as we know, came to heal the sick and save the lost. Maybe this situation in Corinth inspired Paul when he wrote in Romans 5:20. "God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful kindness became more abundant."

We all need God's grace, but if we could ever say one group needed it more, then it might have been Corinth. Paul knew they needed Christ, but he grew discouraged that he could ever make a difference, so God steps in, and commends him to stick it out. To stick it out, because God had many followers in Corinth, and many more that would eventually come to faith. The stakes were very high in Corinth.

The further you are away from God the more you need him, and the more you need God's servants to preach the Gospel. Paul likely got discouraged, because he took his eye off the bigger picture. Feeling oppressed, he found his vision being focused on the immediate events and circumstances before him. That is what discouragement does to us. Discouragement keeps us from looking beyond ourselves to the grand plan God has for humanity.

I ran across a story that illustrates this very well, but you might need a calculator or pen and paper to keep it straight, so here goes. There was an Islamic man who died and left his seventeen camels to be divided between his three sons.

Sunday November 7th, 2021

Now try and follow this math. One son was to get one-ninth of the camels; one was to get one-half; and the other was to get one-third of the camels. But as you can see, seventeen camels are not divisible by three or even two.

The three brothers argued long and loud about how to divide the camels and finally in desperation they agreed to ask a certain wise man what to do. They found him seated in front of his tent with his own camel staked out back. After hearing the case, this wise man took his own camel and added to the seventeen other camels.

This confused the three young men until the wise man began to divide up the camels according to the late father's instructions. He gave one-ninth of the camels to the first son or two camels. Then he gave one-half of the eighteen camels to the next son which is nine. And finally, he gave one-third –or six camels–to the third young man. Did you keep up with the math? Two plus nine, plus six: equals seventeen camels, and the wise man got his own camel back.

What happened here? The brothers were so engrossed in their controversy that they failed to realize that their point of reference was too small. With the simple addition of one eighteenth, the solution presented itself. The wise man's momentary sacrifice of his own camel provided a solution for the brothers at no cost to himself. (1001 More Humorous Illustrations, p.32) That's what we need from God; to enter into our circumstance and widen our perspective. A perspective greater than our problems.

I am absolutely positive that discouragement is stalking the hearts of people here today. A discouragement that is crushing your vitality and stealing your joy, and hampering your walk with Christ. There are signs of it all around us. You can see it in people's faces, hear it in voices, and it is clearly demonstrated in our behavior. And so we hear, "O woe is me!" "If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all."

"Nobody loves me, everybody hates me. I think I'll go eat some worms." If we are grumpy, if we hold a grudge, if we are threatening to take all our marbles and go home; then quite frankly our vision is too small. If the extent of our communication with a brother or sister in Christ is to complain; then our vision is too small. If we think our problems, and our issues, should take top priority in other people's lives; then our vision is too small.

If the only thing people say to our assessment of a situation is "would you like some cheese with your whine", then our vision is too small. If what matters is our comfort, our happiness, our recognition; then our vision is too small. Paul was in serious danger of becoming myopic or near sighted. It was a dangerous thing for him, and it helped the church not one iota. Are we not also in danger of becoming near sighted?

God was saying to Paul, "Yeah, I know Corinth is an awful place. I know it is tough slogging to win people to me. I know you are tired, alone and frustrated, but look at the bigger picture." Have we faith to see beyond ourselves to the work God is doing? Can we see the light shining in even the darkest of places like a city filled with temple prostitutes? Do we care about God's work even when men like Gallio are absolutely indifferent? Can we see the bigger picture through the struggles of our own daily existence?

Sunday November 7th, 2021

There was a couple who lived in London 130 years ago named William and Catherine Booth. They were a godly couple but it seems that William was in a real quandary wondering what it was that God was calling him to do. At that time Catherine Booth was a noted Bible teacher and she was invited to come and preach in London. While the couple were there, William took to taking late night walks through the slums of London's East End.

William noticed that about every fifth building was a pub, and that many of them had steps at their counters so children could climb up to the bar and order gin. The image devastated William and he told Catherine, "I seemed to hear a voice sounding in my ears, 'Where can you go and find such heathen as these, and where is there so great a need for your labors?' Darling, I have found my destiny!"

Later that year, 1865, the couple opened the "Christian Mission" in the London slums. Their life vision: to reach the "down and outers" that other Christians ignored. That simple vision of two people grew into the Salvation Army, which now ministers through three million members in ninety-one countries. (Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching, p. 219) This is the kind of vision God wanted Paul to have in Corinth and I truly believe it is the kind of vision God wants you and I to have right here in Simcoe.