

Be Sober-Minded, Live Faith, Love, & Hope
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Today we're gonna be looking at Paul in Corinth, in Acts 18, the first seventeen verses. And as you're turning there, just to give you a brief, brief catch-up in case you missed the last few weeks; but then we're gonna take some time and read through this passage of Acts 18: 1-17. Paul finds himself in Corinth. He has traveled the vast majority of his second missionary journey. He's covered most of the distance that he'll cover. This is the last place that he remains for any extended period of time. It's also his last port of call, so to speak, on the European continent in modern-day Greece. And he finds himself in Corinth. And I'm gonna go ahead and just read through this, through these first seventeen verses here. Starting in verse 1 it says

After this he (talking about Paul) left from Athens and went to Corinth, where he found a Jewish man named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul came to them, and being of the same occupation stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. He reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade both Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia...

I'm pausing here for a second. He had sent them up to Thessalonica to check on the church in Thessalonica; and so they have just returned.

...Paul was occupied with preaching the message, and solemnly testified to the Jews that the Messiah is Jesus. But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his clothes and told them, "Your blood is on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." So he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed the Lord, along with his whole household. And many of the Corinthians, when they heard, believed and were baptized. Then the Lord said to Paul in a night vision, "Don't be afraid, but keep on speaking and don't be silent, for I am with you and no one will lay a hand on you to hurt you, because I have many people in this city." And he stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the judge's bench. "This man," they said, "persuades people to worship God contrary to the law." And as Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of a crime or of moral evil it would be reasonable for me to put up with you Jews. But if these are questions about words, names, in your own law, see to it yourselves. I don't want to be a judge of such things." So he drove them from the judge's bench. Then they all seized Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the judge's bench. But none of these things concerned Gallio.

This...in this whole process of the second missionary journey, all of a sudden it's like things slow down. Paul is able to catch a breath; he's able to take a break. He actually is able to spend some time here. And the thing that sticks out to me in this passage is that as Paul is sitting here he begins preaching and teaching, and there's people who end up believing; but God tells him, 'Listen, don't worry about this. You just go ahead and keep on speaking. Don't be silent. You're gonna be here for a little while. Don't worry, you aren't gonna be run out of town. You aren't gonna be beaten and imprisoned. And in fact, I've got people here and I'm gonna take care of you. So you just keep on speakin'.' Paul ends up staying there for a year and a half. And I like the fact that just a few verses later, when people do come to attack Paul and drag him before the local official, Paul doesn't even have a chance to open his mouth and defend himself. The official just says, 'Uh, uh. Just get out of here.'

And so I sit here and I look...as I look through this, much of Paul's journey up to this point has been very fast-paced. It just moves. He's goin' from one place to the next, the next, and he encounters just conflict and all kinds of problems. And now he has a chance to slow down and just look at things. And as I look back on Paul's travels...as I was going through this I was doin'...I took time here and I was reading through this and realized, I feel like I'm just able to take a break from the onslaught of things that just keep coming in Acts. And I imagine Paul was doing the same thing.

And as you look back on his travels it seems like often, the tangible results of his efforts, of his work, of his labors...they seem to be very negative. I mean, think about this. In Asia...he travels through Asia, this is where he intended to go. And when he gets there he can't share the gospel with anybody. All the doors are closed; the Holy Spirit does not open up an opportunity, and just keeps moving him along. He gets to Philippi and finally he gets to somewhere where he can preach, and he gets beaten and wrongfully imprisoned without a trial, illegally. He ends up going to Thessalonica and is there for a few weeks and is run out of town shortly thereafter. That happens in every town along the whole way to Athens, where finally he arrives there and he's allowed and invited to come and speak to the local thinkers and philosophers, and the high-minded people of his day. And he does that and some believe, but also he is mocked and ridiculed! I mean, looking back over his travels it seems as though, by the time he's in Corinth there has been quite a bit of just negative results.

But I look at it, and there were also great rewards. I think of going through here, and every place you run into...in Philippi he runs into Lydia, and she receives the Lord because He opens her heart. And the jailor...he rejoices greatly because he's able to believe in God with his whole household. You go on, and in Thessalonica some of the Thessalonians were persuaded to follow God. In Berea there were people who accepted the word of the Lord with great eagerness and they believed. And in Athens, even though Paul had been mocked and ridiculed, there were those who believed. They joined him and believed. And finally, here in Corinth, where he's finally able to take a little bit of a break, there are people who, when they hear, they were believing and being baptized.

And so I was sitting here and I was looking at Easter and where we're headed. And the thing that came to my mind was 1000 Days of Witness. It's something that we're gonna be seeing more of. But it's this idea that we just wanna be more conscientious about sharing our faith. And I sit here and I've been asking myself this week, as I've been thinking about this and looking back over Paul's travels in the second missionary journey, and just wondering what is ahead for us. As we share our faith what are the reactions gonna be? I don't know. But I can't help but think what if there are people who believe who otherwise wouldn't? Like Paul and his travels.

And so I looked, and I was like, ok, I wanted to find out and I was just sitting here and I was wondering 'What is it, Paul? What is it that makes your witness, your life, different?' And what I went to, and I turned to because it gives us in many ways the best insight into what is going on in his mind at this time, is the letter to the Thessalonians. And so I'm gonna spend a little time just looking at this, because Paul gets to Corinth; he was chased out of Thessalonica after just a short period of time. He gets to Corinth and he's concerned about them. He sent Timothy and Silas back to check on them. And when they come back, he hears word about how they are doing. And he's encouraged. And so he writes the letter to the Thessalonians to just encourage them, and to make sure that they hold onto and understand the core of Christian witness, what our lives are to be about. And so, as I look at this the thing that struck me as I was reading through Thessalonians...and it struck me so hard this week that I couldn't help but share this with you.

Paul begins and ends...faith, love, and hope are themes throughout the whole book of Thessalonians. But the core of Christian witness—the core of what we're to be about, the thing that Paul is most concerned about—is their faith, their love, and their hope. He starts off in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, and he says

I have been constantly praying for you, and when I do I remember before God...I remember and I pray for your work of faith, your labor of love, and your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And as he's wrapping up the book he's been talking about 'we're going to face struggles. We're going to be persecuted; we're going to have high times and low times. There's going to be times when we are just battered by life and the Christian walk...it's not smooth sailing. It's a battle; it's a struggle.' And so, in response, he says what we need to do is we need to be sober-minded. We need to be vigilant. We need to be aware that life is difficult. And in response what we do is we put on faith and love as a breastplate, as armor to guard our hearts and our lives. We put on a helmet of hope of our salvation. We hold onto these three things as we face the struggles and the battles of life—faith, love, and hope.

And so I wanna take just a few minutes here and look at this, what is in many ways the core of our Christian faith. And we'll look at these. The first—the work of faith. It's focused primarily on the tangible result, the outcome of faith. It's similar to if we talk about a work of art. When we talk about a work of art we aren't referring to the process of the artist making that work of art. When we talk about the work of art it's the tangible result; it's the evidence of that artist's creativity. In the same way, the work of faith is the evidence of our faith. And how this plays out...he explains what the content of their faith is. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 he says that, first of all, that they

"...turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."

They let go. We talked about idols last week. Idols are basically just man-made ideas of who God is and what He is. They're my attempts to earn favor, and earn worth and value, and they're things I place my confidence in other than God. And Paul says, 'You turned away from that and you turned to serve the living God who really exists.'

And it's not just that, but they wait on His Son, Jesus Christ, the One who died and was resurrected, and who came to rescue us. See, that's the thing that's different here, is we turn away from our attempts to try and earn God's favor on our own, and we just trust in Jesus Christ. And I love this imagery, because it really is the imagery of rescuing, of salvation, of deliverance.

What came to my mind as I was reading through this...there's the movie, "The Guardian," Kevin Costner, Ashton Kutcher...anybody seen it? Yeah, some. Ok, I'm getting' a few nods out here. Ok. Well, there's this movie. It's about Coast Guard rescue swimmers. And the image that comes to my mind is something like that. It's a dark night, storm-tossed sea, there is no hope. There is none. Being battered by waves, and the boat is going down, and all of a sudden what happens is you hear the sound of this helicopter. There's a light from the sky, and someone drops out of the sky into the storm-tossed seas to come and save you, and do what you cannot do for yourself. And he grabs you, and he comes and he will hoist you up out of the storm-tossed seas to take you home and to save you and deliver you.

And that's exactly what Jesus Christ does for us. It's the simple fact that we sit here and we see the fact that someone has dropped from heaven, and He has come down to this earth, to the storm-tossed seas of life, to my sinful existence. And He grabs onto me and He says, 'I will rescue you. I will do what you cannot do. I will take you up out of here. I will lift you out of here and take you home.' And I have faith in that and in nothing else.

That's what I think of here is the content of their faith; and the result of their faith is really awesome. This is something that I am hoping and I am praying for myself and for our church. See, in Thessalonica Paul says that they became an example to all believers everywhere...in Achaea, in Macedonia, basically throughout modern-day Greece, in a time when there was no email, or CNN, or FOX News, or anything else. Paul says that everywhere—not just here, but everywhere—'everybody talks about this. This is something that the evidence of your faith is known all over the place. Not saying that everybody agrees with it, but everybody sees it and is impacted by it.' How awesome would that be for us to experience that here? For me to experience that in my life, for you to experience it in your life, and for us as a congregation to experience that?

I also look at the labor of love. The labor of love that Paul talks about...this is focused more on the process, the effort put into it. It's this enormous, extraordinary effort that's expended because of love that you have for someone. It goes hand-in-hand with faith. The work of faith...that's the tangible outpouring, the result; and the labor of love is that process. And Paul talks to the Thessalonians in chapter 2, verses 3 through 8. He says, 'You remember how I came to you. I didn't come...I was sharing the gospel with you not because I had some ulterior motive, not because I had some impure motive, or I was trying to deceive you.' He says, 'I didn't speak to try and please you or the people in Thessalonica. The only reason I spoke was to please God. And that's why I didn't just pat you on the back, and congratulate you, and make you feel good about yourselves. I spoke the truth. Not only that, but I didn't do it out of a motive for greed. I didn't expect anything in return. I didn't ask for fame or glory, or anything else. My motives were simply this—I care so much about you, I was so affectionate for you, that I was pleased, I was happy, it was my joy to share the gospel with you. And not only that...my own life. I was willing to pour out my own life. I was willing to go to any effort to share the gospel with you that was required.' And we see that in Paul's time here. Throughout the second missionary journey he reminds the Thessalonians in chapter 2 verse 9 how, when he was there, he and his companions, they worked night and day. They rolled up their sleeves and they were working hard so that they would not be a burden.

And he gets to Corinth, and he's waiting on his companions, and he says, 'Man, I really want to share the gospel. And I'll share the gospel, but I need to earn a living.' So he rolls up his sleeves and he starts making tents. He does all of this not because it's what he loves to do, making tents, but because if that's what he has to do to share the gospel, if that's the sacrifice he makes, that's fine. He'll work, and it's motivated by love. He reasons with people. He expends the mental and emotional, and time commitment, and all of that energy...he expends that to share the gospel with people. He sits down everywhere he goes throughout the second missionary journey, and in Acts chapters 16, 17, and 18 you see that he is sitting down and speaking and reasoning with people; even though many times he is mocked and ridiculed for it. But he loves them so much he is willing to do it.

And then I think of...there's this list. And this is just an impressive resumé, so to speak, to me, of the efforts that you were willing to go to to share the gospel with somebody. And he gives it in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27. And basically what he says...he's reminding the Corinthians, the people where he is now staying...he writes this letter a few years later. He's reminding them of all that he has gone through to share the gospel. It points to his motives and everything else. He says, 'First of all, I've been beaten up so many times it's without number. I can't count how many times I've been beaten. But of the times that stick out, let me call those to mind. First of all, five times I was flogged. They took a flog and flogged me with thirty-nine lashes. There were another...oh...three times that they took the canes and they basically caned me. They struck me with rods. There was another time where they took stones, and they beat me with stones until they thought I was dead. I've been shipwrecked three times. I've actually spent a night and a day floating in the sea, clinging to a board or something else. And the whole time that I've been traveling I've been in danger—danger from weather, danger from robbers, danger from my own countrymen, danger from your countrymen. I've been in danger, and I haven't even had my own home. I haven't had anything with me other than the clothes on my back. So I have been cold, and wet, and hungry. But all of that is worth it.'

It's just evidence that these are not just words. Paul has this love that is willing to expend every single ounce of anything he has in him because of his love for other people. He's willing to give until he has nothing left to give...of his time, his energy, his effort...whatever.

Steadfastness of hope...the reason for hope that Paul explains in Thessalonians, and this is just one spot in Thessalonians that he explains it, but in Thessalonians 5:9-10, he says the whole reason we can hope is because *"...God has not destined us for wrath."* He hasn't destined us for judgment; we are no longer under condemnation. He's freed us from that. Instead, what God has destined us for is that we would be saved; that Jesus Christ would descend into the storms of our life and grab hold of us, and He would take us up, and He would take us home. He would save us. He would rescue us from ourselves, from our own sin, so that whether we are awake or asleep, whether I'm living or I'm dead, it doesn't matter. I am alive with Christ because even death has no power over Christ. And so I'm alive no matter what.

And you see that in Paul's travels, and I think of his return to Lystra, and his continuing through Asia in the first ten verses of Acts 16. He returned to Lystra. This is where he met up with Timothy. This is also the place where a couple years prior they had stoned him, they thought, to death. And he returned there, to the place where people had tried to kill him not too long before, to try and share the gospel again. Why? Because his confidence wasn't in himself. And it continues on, and he endures and he keeps going all the way through Asia as doors are closing and he doesn't have an opportunity. He rejoices in the prison in Philippi. Why? Because of the confidence and the sureness, the hope he has in Christ that lets him weather that storm. Throughout his journeys he's beaten, he's wrongfully imprisoned, he gets run out of multiple towns, he's mocked, he's ridiculed. The whole time he stays the course and he is able to endure. And the reason he is able to endure is because of the hope and the confidence he has in Christ.

That's why I look at Philippians 3:13, which is another letter that we looked at a few weeks ago. And he says, 'Listen, you wanna know the secret? Everything that is in the past—the good, the bad, everything—I just, I forget about it. It's in the past. And the one thing I do is I look forward to what is coming and I grab hold of that. I look forward to Christ and the salvation that He brings.' It's this idea of, you know, the Guardian...he comes down and so here it is. If you're sitting on a sinking ship and it's going down, and the Coast Guard rescue swimmer comes and he says, 'Hey, I got this hoist here. I can take you up out of this. You wanna come?' You probably aren't going to be holding onto the boat trying to take it with you as it's goin' to the bottom of the ocean. Instead, you are gonna be sitting here, and Paul says 'This is what I do. I let go of everything else...good, bad, it doesn't matter...and I am holding onto, with all that I have inside of me...I am holding onto what is ahead. I'm holding on with a death grip to this One who has come down to rescue me. And He's holding onto me. I have utter confidence that He will get me home. And so I let go of everything else that has come before.'

And so I come back to the core of Christian witness, and the core of our Christian life and how it's found in our faith, our love, and our hope. And I look at how Paul...he begins and ends Thessalonians, which he wrote here while he's in Corinth in this year and a half while he has a chance to stop and reflect. And the thing that's on his mind is faith, love, and hope.

And so the challenge that I'm making to myself, and the challenge that I'll make to you, is simply this—let us be sober-minded and live faith, live love, and live hope. What do I mean by this? Let us be sober-minded—I'm not giving you some rose-tinted picture of how the world will be. We're gonna be battered by storms. We live in a sinful world. I am a sinner. You are all sinners. Everyone in the world is a sinner. And we live in a broken world. I will face struggles, and I will face things that are so far beyond me that I don't have the strength to face up to 'em. And so that's why I'm going to approach things with a very serious mindset, understanding where I am going and what I need to hold onto and what I need to do.

And then I'm gonna live faith. I'm willing to let go of everything else. I'm willing to stop trying to earn my confidence, my value, my satisfaction, in these other idols that threaten to turn my heart away from God. And I'm gonna determine and make this challenge to myself on a regular basis of turning away from those things and not making God be whoever I want Him to be. And I'm just going to turn and place my trust in the God who exists, the living and true God. And I'm gonna live faith like that, one day at a time, letting go of idols and holding onto God.

I'm gonna live love. I look at it, and I'm not gonna hold anything back. I'm determined that every single day I wanna come sliding into home with nothing left, where I pour out...and it's just a realization that God has so much infinite love and grace that I don't have to hold back for myself. I can totally expend from myself, and I can pour out love and grace on people regardless of whether or not they deserve it. Why? Because I know that tomorrow the same God who exists today...He'll be there tomorrow, and He'll keep pouring love and grace back into me until I am overflowing. I cannot out-give grace, and I cannot out-give love; I cannot out-give God! And so I'm gonna give it all and hold nothing back. Why? Because I love my Lord, and I love the world around me.

And then I'm gonna live hope. No matter what comes with the economy, no matter what things hit my family or my friends, people whom I love, whatever grief comes...I'm not saying that things are not difficult. It's not this rose-tinted glasses that 'Oh, it's all smooth sailing and glass-calm seas.' It's a simple realization that I am in a storm-tossed sea and I expect to be battered. But I am confident in the One who has come to save me. And that is where I will place my hope—not in my financial portfolio, not in my health insurance program, or the wisdom of doctors, or not in my currently...you know, the status of my relationships right now...I'm not gonna place confidence in any of that. I'm only gonna place confidence in my Lord, who came to save me.

And that's the challenge that I will make to you, is if you are a follower of Christ that you would join me in this on an individual basis, every day. Be sober-minded, and live faith, live love, and live hope. And if you're here and you're not a follower of Christ, and you say, "I want that," my challenge to you is simply this. You can have it. You have to be willing to let go of all you attempts to earn, and you have to simply acknowledge the fact that you cannot save yourself. You will never be worthy of God's acceptance or anything else. It's a simple fact that you realize 'I am a sinner and I deserve to die. I do. I don't deserve the good that I receive. But I also know that God chose to save me. And I trust that Jesus is enough. He came down and He lived a sinless life in a sinful world. And He died in my place so that I may live. And He was raised up, and because He is raised up I believe that He can also raise me up. He can also take me home. He has the power to do it...I don't.' And you, too, if you are not a follower of Christ, you can have that. It's not somethin' that's gonna be smooth sailing, but it's a realization that we have a hope that cannot be beaten, cannot be crushed by whatever we face, and by the storms of life.

Let's stand.

[Congregation sings the blessing song.]

Go in grace.