

Sin City

Acts 18:1-11

Introduction

A church member gave me an article from the *Wall Street Journal* recently that talked about the searching and wandering of the people of Russia. This is especially true in the capital city of St. Petersburg, where, it says, the city is abounding in healers and mystics. Let me read a few of the interesting things this article had to say.

Stern minded Soviets made the city a hot house of science and learning, but that is now fast on the ebb. Its academies have withered. Its scientists have gone begging. The place is returning to the superstitions of old. Mediums and psychics and holy crazies abound, just as they did in the tumultuous finale to the Romanav age.

Today, St. Petersburg has a ufology society to chronicle alien sightings. It has a scientific research institute of karma, to soothe a person's aura. Classified sections bulge with every service for the soul and psyche under the moon. "These are troubling times," says a local psychologist from St. Petersburg, "we are all searching madly for cures and direction."

This Russian psychologist has perfectly defined the state of mankind. Whether you live in St. Petersburg, Russia, or St. Petersburg, Florida; whether you travel to Russia or live in Raleigh, North Carolina, the mad search is on.

We arrive today, at chapter 18 in the book of Acts. Verse 1 tells us,

After these things he [Paul] left Athens and went to Corinth.

We spent five sessions observing Paul's ministry in Athens, as he dealt with this city whose searching had led them into polytheism. Athens had a god and goddess for everything. It was steeped in philosophy and intellectualism. They were hungry for the truth.

Now Paul arrives in Corinth. And, as I studied this city, the differences between Corinth and Athens became obvious and rather stark. Both are searching for the cure and are in need of direction, but each seeks for it in a different place.

Where the Athenians dialogued, the Corinthians drank. In fact, during Paul's day, on the theater stages of that part of Greece, if an actor was on stage playing the part of a Corinthian, he was usually drunk.

I also saw a distinct difference in the fact that while the Athenians had ten thousand idols, the Corinthians had ten thousand religious prostitutes. In this day, abortion was a blight on its society, and infanticide as well. If they had a baby that they did not want, they would put the baby out on the stoop, especially if it were a girl and unable to carry on the family name, and the slave traders would come by and pick those little baby girls up. By the time Paul arrived in Corinth, ten thousand of these little girls had been enslaved to the temple of Venus. And every night, it was their role to descend on the city of Corinth and re-enact the religion of this city.

Where Athenians debated in philosophy, Corinthians were addicted to pornography. In fact, by the time Paul arrives in this incredibly wicked city, the Greek word for "Corinthian" had already become a

nickname for immorality. The Greek name “Korinthios,” if attached to a woman, would be saying that this woman was loose. If a man was called a “Corinthian man,” that meant he was dishonest, an adulterer, a fornicator. That word had come to mean any form of immorality, dishonesty, or debauchery that you could imagine.

One author that I read, referred to Corinth as, “a rip-roaring town where none but the tough could survive.”

Sin City: The Culture

Today, I want to draw out of this passage, as Paul approaches this evil and needy city, six principles.

Principle #1 – There has never been an easy place to live for Christ

1. Principle number one – there has never been an easy place to live for Christ.

If you climb into the sandals of the apostle Paul, you will most likely never complain again about how tough it is to live for Jesus Christ in your city.

You might say, “But you don’t know the temptation. You don’t know my pressures. You don’t know my peers; my professors. You don’t know my family.”

No, my friend, you do not know Corinth. This place was “Sin City”.

Three difficulties faced by Paul in his ministry in Corinth

Now, for the apostle Paul, there were a number of difficulties, at the outset of his ministry in Corinth, that created a difficult chapter in his life. Let me give you three of them.

Paul faced spiritual darkness

- First, as I have already mentioned, Paul faced not only spiritual, but moral darkness, with the primary Corinthian religion of immorality.

Corinth was a place where every vice would be out in the open – homosexuality was rampant; divorce was epidemic. In fact, by this time, it was said of the high bred women of Greece that they would name their years by the names of their husbands.

One author said that this city of two hundred thousand people was, “a sweltering reflection of inner-

city New York, Las Vegas, and Hollywood rolled into one city.”

Paul would confront it all with the gospel of Christ.

Paul experienced financial difficulty

- Secondly, Paul experienced financial difficulty in Corinth, to make matters worse.

In fact, verses 2 and 3 of Acts, chapter 18, tell us that, when he arrived, he eventually moved in with some tent makers, obviously in order to make ends meet. Fortunately, he could fall back on this trade that he had learned as a little boy.

The rabbis used to teach that if you do not teach your son a trade, you teach him how to steal.

So, the trade that Paul had evidently learned as a boy, was how to make a tent, with coarse goat’s hair or leather. And it must have been a difficult time, because we find him having to make tents to survive; to put food in his stomach.

Paul endured physical and emotional discouragement

- Thirdly, Paul also endured physical and emotional discouragement.

We will discuss this more later, but at least know that he had just completed a five hundred mile walk. In addition, he had been beaten some time ago, had fled three cities already, and had just left a city with very little result. Now, he makes this long journey, but this time, he is alone, as his companions are in another town.

So, Paul arrives in Corinth with no place to stay, very little money – in fact, in need of money – and he does not know anyone. To make matters worse, he has arrived at one of the most ungodly cities on planet earth.

Sin City: The Campaign

Principle #2 – There is never a time when you will not benefit from friends of like spiritual passion

2. That leads me to the second principle – there is never a time when you will not benefit from friends of like spiritual passion.

Look at verses 2 and 3.

And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, [the western text inserts “and of the same tribe”] he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.

Now, most believe that Aquila and Priscilla were already believers, having come to faith in Rome, where a church already existed. We do know, by putting the clues together, that they are a tremendous couple who knew God’s word well enough that, in a few verses, they are going to straighten out a visiting preacher named Apollos, who was a little off. They will also, by the way, follow Paul to Ephesus. They become team members with the apostle Paul.

One author, that I read some time ago, said that every believer has in their lives, a couple of different kinds of people. There are those who sap your spiritual passion and there are a few who share your spiritual passion – something you could always use a few more of, right? This couple were a couple who shared Paul’s spiritual passion.

Perhaps you are thinking, “This is what I’m missing in my life. Where’s my Aquila? Where’s my Priscilla? Lord, why don’t You make them find me?”

Well, if you look closely, you will discover that they did not find Paul – Paul found them. Verse 2 says, “And he found . . .”. Paul found kindred spirits who shared his spiritual passion.

There is more encouragement along this line. Notice verse 5.

But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

Now we know, from other scripture, that Silas and Timothy bring with them, monetary gifts from the believers in Philippi. In fact, the church at Philippi is the only church to support Paul financially, as he mentions later. The result, as verse 5 tells us, is that Paul is able to devote himself completely to the word. In other words, he can set aside his needle, his goat’s hair, and his leather; he does not have to make tents now; he is supported in the ministry full time. What a delight that must have been.

One of the thrills of this past year, was when I was saying farewell, with other members of the missions team, to Jean-Pierre and Jocelyn Mezzier. They are a French missionary couple that our church has supported. He did not know any English and I do not know any French, so every once in a while, we would look at each other and say, “Super! Fantastic!” – that was about it! They are a godly couple, dedicated to the work of Christ.

Our mission team had learned, in their week with us, that two months out of the year Jean-Pierre had to leave the ministry and go deeper into southern France to pick grapes to pay his French taxes. He made enough from his little church to put food on the table and to make ends meet, but not enough to pay his taxes. So, he had to set the ministry aside and it was a difficult time for him. Of course, his church had to say, “Farewell, we’ll see you in two months.”

Our mission team had the joy of saying, “Our church will support you and let your church become our sister church and give you enough money so that you never have to go back and pick grapes again. You can devote yourself entirely to God’s vineyard.”

I will never forget, as Jocelyn translated that to him, he put his hands to his face and began to weep with joy. We have been privileged to be the church of Philippi to him, like that body was to Paul. And I could be wrong, but when I look at verse 5, I see tears in between the lines.

So Paul receives good news, grocery money, and godly fellowship. There is not a time in any of our lives when we could not use a little more of one of those things, right? Well, he got all three. What a great day!

Principle #3 – There has never been a great opportunity without great opposition

3. Principle number three – there has never been a great opportunity without great opposition.

Look at verse 4.

And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

Skip to verse 6.

But when they resisted . . .

This phrase literally means, “when they lined up in battle array”. This is not just, “Okay, we don’t want to hear that.” No, they put their dukes up and

are ready to go to battle with this man that had invaded their synagogue with the truth of the Messiah that they could care less about. And, they ultimately blasphemed.

The text in verse 6 says,

But when they resisted and blasphemed, he [Paul] shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

Now in the Old Testament, two different phrases that I am sure you have read, were highly significant. Paul uses one of them in this verse. “A person who has blood on his hands” is meant to indicate that this person bears the responsibility for the life and death of someone else; their blood is on his hands. But to have blood on your own head, as Paul says in this verse, means that you are responsible for your own death. And, the judgement that you will incur from a holy God one day, will be completely your own fault.

Paul is telling the Corinthians, “the blood is on your head”. In other words, “You are responsible, having heard the truth. You will stand before God one day, and judgement will come and you will have no one to blame but yourself.”

Of course, that did not make the Corinthians very happy.

Now, Paul declares that he is going to preach to the Gentiles. With that, he shakes the dust off his garments, as if to say, “I don’t want any of that stuff clinging to me.”

He says, “I’m going to go preach to the Gentiles,” and he does leave – he goes all the way next door. Look at verse 7.

Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titus Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue.

I like that! He did not get very far away. In fact, they could probably still hear him preaching!

Notice verse 8a.

Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household . .

Well, if the enemy was angry with Paul before, he is livid now. Why? Because, as Warren Wiersbe states, in reference to this paragraph, “Satan knew

that Paul was invading his territory and liberating his slaves.”

There is never an opportunity without accompanying opposition.

Do you want some trouble in your life? The right kind of trouble, by the way. Then, live for Jesus Christ. On your job site, bow your head before you eat and stir things up. Mention the name of Christ as someone that you are devoted to.

Charles Spurgeon said it very well, when he said, “Satan never kicks a dead horse, just a live one.”

Sin City: The Crisis

Principle #4 – There is never a moment when the strongest quality of your testimony does not need to be carefully guarded

4. In spite of all this incredible fruit and the courageous advances into this territory, let me give the next principle and then we will read further. Principle number four – there is never a moment when the strongest quality of your testimony does not need to be carefully guarded.

Look at verse 8b.

. . . and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.

The Corinthians were being baptized as an expression of their belief.

Continue to verse 9.

And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent;”

Now stop here. This is rather shocking news. Paul afraid?! Paul silenced?! This is the man who said and wrote the foundation of the song, “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation . . .*”. But according to this verse, fear clutches his throat.

Something was happening during the events in the last part of verse 8, while people were hearing and believing and being immersed, or “baptizo”. Something was happening to Paul that is exactly the opposite of what you would expect to be happening to Paul.

The original verb, translated “do not be afraid,” is a present imperfect with a negative, which means that

the Lord is telling Paul to stop an action that is already in progress. The next verb, translated “do not be silent,” is different. It is *erros* subjunctive with a negative, which means the Lord is preventing, or attempting to prevent, an action that is about to begin.

I do not say that so you will know I did my Greek homework, but because you probably need a little proof. What is happening in this verse is, Paul, if you can believe it, is already afraid. He is told to stop being afraid. That is an action in progress. Then, he is also contemplating resigning as the chief spokesman of the Corinthian crusade.

I am stunned by this revelation of Paul, the fearless one, who is now afraid. Why? We are not told. But I had all week to come up with a guess. Let me tell you what I think is going on.

Think about what has happened to Paul, as we have studied his life, in every city that he has gone to on the European tour. Listen to events of his tour:

- He begins in Macedonia. What happens there? He is beaten with rods and thrown into prison.
- He leaves and goes to Thessalonica. God is at work there; God is moving; people are coming to faith in Christ. And then, the city is set in an uproar and a mob is incited that seeks to take his life. He flees in the night to save his life.
- He flees to Berea and things are going well there. The church is being established and the people are coming to Christ. And then, Thessalonians come and incite a mob at Berea and he again, has to flee in the night to save his life.
- Now, he is in Corinth. And, I believe, with every new convert; with every advance; with every incredible testimony, something in Paul’s stomach begins to churn, and fear begins to grip at his throat. Will there be another riot; another mob of angry killers; another painful beating; another night in jail?

The reason I think this guess is true, as to why Paul is afraid, is primarily because of what the Lord will say to him that, I believe, further clarifies it. Look at verse 10a, where the Lord says to Paul, in a vision,

for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you . . .

In other words, “Paul, it happened back in those other cities, but it’s not going to happen here.”

Now I am so glad this has been revealed of Paul, because he becomes a lot more like us, doesn’t he? This is encouraging because, maybe we can become a lot more like him.

Fearing the future had seriously deflated Paul’s confidence in the direction of the Lord and his own personal courage. He began to borrow the worst possible scenario from the future, without ever asking the Lord. He was sure it was going to happen, to the point that he was riddled with fear and was already contemplating packing his bags and leaving while the getting out was good.

Many of us are good at that, aren’t we? We are professionals at borrowing trouble. We know the worst is going to happen, don’t we? We suffer a thousand tribulations just waiting for the tribulation to occur, and sometimes, it does not even occur.

Kent Hughes writes an interesting story of a lesson Abraham Lincoln learned that he would use later as President, when he was surrounded by bad news. In his circuit riding days as a lawyer, Lincoln, and his companions, riding to the next session of court, crossed many swollen rivers. But the Fox River was still ahead, on this particular journey, and they said to one another, “If these streams give us so much trouble, how shall we cross the Fox River?”

When darkness fell, they stopped for the night at a log tavern, where they ate with other guests. Among them was the presiding Methodist elder of the district, who rode through the country in all kinds of weather and knew all about the Fox River. They gathered about him and asked about the present state of the river. “Oh, yes,” replied the circuit-riding preacher, “I know all about the Fox River. I’ve crossed it often and I understand it well. But I have one fixed rule with regard to the Fox River – I never cross until I reach it.”

Paul was convinced that the future held an uprising; a beating; a mob. But God knew that up ahead, was a revival and an extended ministry.

The greatest comfort to Paul, by the way, was in those first few words of verse 10. Look at that again,

for I am with you . . .

Principle #5 – There has never been a challenge or crisis that leaves you on your own

5. This leads me to principle number five – there has never been a challenge or crises that leaves you on your own.

Now Paul did not have a copy of Matthew in his hip pocket that he could pull it out and turn to Matthew, chapter 28, and read the promises of God. He did not have verses 19 and 20, that we have in our hands, where God told the church,

Go therefore and make disciples . . . baptizing them . . . teaching them . . . and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

The Great Commission in Corinth

Paul could not pull that out and dust it off and re-read it. So God came to him in a vision and gave him, basically, the same promise. In fact, it is fascinating to me the way this great commission in Matthew, chapter 28, is fulfilled to the “T” in Acts, chapter 18. Look at the ways in which it was fulfilled:

- God said, in Matthew 28:19, “**Go . . .**” and in Acts 18:1, Paul goes.
- God said, in Matthew 28:19 “. . . **make disciples . . .**” and in Acts 18:8, Paul does this.
- God said, in Matthew 28:19, “. . . **baptizing them . . .**” and in Acts 18:8, Paul does this.
- God said, in Matthew 28:19, “. . . **teaching them . . .**” and in Acts 18:11, Paul does this.
- God promises, in Matthew 28:20, “. . . **lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age**” and in Acts 18:10, God gives Paul the same promise.

God gives Paul everything that He has given us.

Principle #6 – There is never an assignment from God that will not yield some eternal fruit

6. One more principle, number six – there is never an assignment from God that will not yield some eternal fruit.

Look at verse 10 again and notice the last part of the verse.

for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.

I find those words fascinating. God knows who will believe in Him, but, more than that, He refers to those who will believe in Him in the future as already His in the present. God refers to the elect in Corinth. He knows who they are.

Now it is not so amazing to me that a sovereign God knows who the elect are – what amazes me is that there are elect in Corinth. Not in *this* city! Not in “Sin City”! Not in *this* town!

Notice also, that God said, “. . . I have” – what? – “*many* people . . .”! You should underline that word and let it encourage your heart when things are dark . . . and ministry is like a rock you are chipping away at . . . and your family does not listen . . . and those peers around you could care less . . . God said, “. . . I have *many* people in this city.” In other words, “This city is ready for the gospel.”

Now, I have been to Las Vegas. I know that is hard for you to imagine. That money this church used to have in the building fund . . . No, no, I am just teasing!

I was a college student, traveling for my Christian college in a Christian singing group, and we happened to sing at a church in Las Vegas. I stayed in the home of a fellow that night, along with a couple of other buddies in the singing group, and his particular job was stocking the Coca-Cola machines in many of the night spots. After we sang, we went to his house and ate supper, and he said, “Hey, you guys, I’ve got to go to work. If you want to go with me, I’ll give you a back tour of Vegas. Would you like that?”

I said, “Will you keep it a secret?!”

So he took us all through that town. And I have to tell you, never once did the thought ever occur to me, as a ministerial student, preparing for the ministry, *never* did the thought occur to me, going through Vegas, “Wow! This city is a ripe harvest field. What a great place to start a church. These people are ready for the gospel of Christ.”

Never! I do not think that thought ever crossed the mind of Paul about Corinth either. It was time for God to shock him.

Conclusion

Now notice verse 11. Paul only does this in three cities and this is one of the three cities.

And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

John Phillips, an outstanding British expositor, writes these words,

Here at Corinth, in the filth capital of the world, were many hungry hearts. There were lonely people, disillusioned by pleasure and worldliness; people who had drunk from Satan's broken cisterns and poisoned wells; desperate people; people who were not only lost, but knew they were lost. There were sailors, tired of lives of drunkenness and debauchery. There were the broken women, the cast-offs of the temple, where sin was their daily bread. There were successful businessmen, whose money could buy them everything but happiness. There were housewives struggling for a decent home life in a city as fowl as Sodom. There were young people, whose ideals had been blighted by the diseased state of the society in which they lived. Some were tired of "tinsel town". The fleshly pleasures had lost their attraction. Some were suffering deep guilt and an awful emptiness of soul. They were ready to receive Christ.

So to the utter surprise of Paul, a man who was ready to give up, "Sin City" was ready for the gospel. And he learned some valuable lessons there.

The reason we know Paul learned is because of the way he would write to this church that would develop. He would write them a letter and tell them, in I Corinthians, chapter 2, verses 1a and 3,

. . . when I came to you, . . . I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling

He ends that same epistle by saying to them, chapter 15, verse 58,

. . . be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

In other words, "Don't quit. And, don't be quiet. Say to the Lord, 'Lord, do a work inside of me,' and, 'Lord, do a work through me.'"

Then, in the midst of your "Sin City," watch Him go to work.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/25/1998 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 1998 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.