

Text: Acts 18  
St Stephen's

Feb 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
Sunday

## Strategy Shift

Everyone has times of great difficulty and anxiety...

The coming realignment is such a moment for me...

Paul had just such a season as he traveled from Athens to Corinth on his second missionary journey...

### Paul's visit to Corinth

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

1 Corinthians 2:3

It is a great encouragement to me that Paul came down to Corinth like this. It says to me that **seasons like this are normal**. They happen to **great leaders** like Paul and **normal people** like you and me. I love the **honesty** of the Bible about these things – it is one of reasons I trust the Bible – because it is dead level **honest about life**. It's characters are real. They have lives like ours.

So **here is Paul** – after a radical **conversion**, after multiple and extended episodes of **personal visions** of the risen Lord Jesus and after years of **missionary work** attested by **signs and wonders and miracles** of the highest order– here is Paul in a **season of weakness and fear and trembling**.

### Why?

- Perhaps it was **his worry about the young churches**. He knew what **he** had had to face, but often he wouldn't know what **they** had had to face till months after he left town. They would face opposition from without and difficulties from within, and the Apostle was worried for them.
- Perhaps because of **the difficulties at Athens**. We saw last week how Paul stepped into the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire and debated the leading philosophers of his day – but what we didn't notice is that **only a few people had been converted**. Perhaps

he was reassessing his strategy.

- Perhaps because of **the challenge at Corinth**; their immorality was proverbial. Behind the city some 2000 feet above sea level was the rocky mount called the Acro-corinth. On its flat summit was the temple of Aphrodite. From her temple each night 1000 female slaves roamed the city's streets as prostitutes. If Athens was the Harvard Square of the Roman Empire, Corinth was her red light district. Paul had heard the stories.
- Perhaps because of his **physical frailty**. It was back on his first mission journey that bodily weakness had become an issue. "A thorn in the flesh" was his phrase for it. That was years ago – years of hard work and hard travel and deprivation and disease ridden regions – and on top of that what he had suffered in city after city; he had been frequently arrested, beaten, whipped, stoned, and jailed.
- Perhaps because of his **loneliness**. Silas and Timothy and Luke had stayed behind in Macedonia when Paul traveled south to Athens. And now winter had set in, preventing them from rejoining Paul in Corinth. He was on his own, and he felt it.

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

Sometimes the hardships of what you have to face make you **think hard** about how you are going after it. The journey would have covered over **60 miles**, several long days of walking by himself. It would have been time to **think and pray**. Time to think it all over again, pray it all through again.

Times like that are important. By the time he got to Corinth, Paul had made some **important adjustments**.

- **From Part Time to Full Time**

*Each Sabbath found Paul at the synagogue, trying to convince the Jews and Greeks alike. And after Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul spent all his time preaching the word.*

Acts 18:4-5 (NLT)

Paul had found a couple named **Aquila and Priscilla** when he came to Corinth, refugees from Rome, where the Jews had been expelled, and apparently believers in the Lord. On top of that, Paul and Aquilla were both tentmakers. We haven't noticed this before, but it was the custom that Jewish **rabbis learned a trade**, so that they could earn enough to live. Paul was a **tentmaker**, and we learn at the beginning of ch. 18 that Paul was welcomed into Aquilla and Priscilla's home, and worked alongside Aquilla during the week.

On the Sabbath (**look at the phrase 'each Sabbath'**), he went to the synagogue, and as a visiting Rabbi, would be welcome to teach, where he tried to convince the Jews that Jesus was the messiah.

We call this '**tentmaking ministry**' and it is one of the leading mission strategies in the world today, where people will go overseas and work in a normal field of expertise, supporting themselves, and using the relationships with co-workers and neighbors and a bridge for the gospel.

But in the next verse, **his strategy changed**. The winter had come to an end and boats were sailing again, and Silas and Timothy – and probably Luke – joined him in Corinth. The team was tripled in size – and they brought with them **a financial gift** from the churches in Macedonia (Paul writes about this gift in his second letter to the Corinthians, ch 11), which enabled him to stop making tents and spend all his time evangelizing. He went **from part time to full time**. **Look at the phrase 'all his time'**. And his team went from one to three or four. It was a large boost to the work of the gospel. Things began to move forward.

- **From Closed Hearts to Open Hearts**

*But when they opposed and insulted him, Paul shook the dust from his clothes and said, "Your blood is upon your own heads—I am innocent. From now on I will go preach to the Gentiles."*

Acts 18:6-7 (NLT)

The **opposition** eventually became sharp in the synagogue, and they even began to insult the team and began to ridicule the message about Jesus. To Paul, that became a sign that it was **time to move on**, that the door was closing.

Sometimes it is time to move on.

I remember **camping** up in Canada when the kids were little. I was watching a man fish along the shoreline of a beautiful lake. I was talking to another camper about it, and he said to me, 'He might as well turn around and toss that lure up into the brush – he would get as many bites.' He went on to explain that at that time of the year, no fish patrolled the shore areas, because the water was far too warm for the smaller fish they preyed upon. "They have all retreated to the deeper, cooler water, and they only will feed at certain hours of the day." You had to know that to have a chance of catching fish.

If you want to catch fish, you have to **fish where the fish are biting**. Sometimes **people can get so closed** to the gospel that speaking to them about Jesus is just like a fisherman casting his lure up into the bushes. Nothing's biting up there. Sometimes you just have to let people go and leave them in God's hands and move on to someone who is hungry. Looking. Seeking.

Sometimes **religious institutions** that are near and dear to the heart of God can get so closed to God that it is time to move on and leave them in God's hands. **Look at the phrase, 'when they opposed and insulted him**. Now look at **Paul's response: From now on I will go preach to the Gentiles.**

Sometimes it is time to move on. Paul did just that.

But Paul's challenges went deeper than issues of effort and focus. There was also an issue of message...

- **From Reasoning to Testifying**

Remember he had just come **from Athens** where he had been debating the philosophers. Look carefully at the verb Luke uses to describe Paul's ministry in Athens...

*he was reasoning in the synagogue... and in the market place.*

Acts 17:17

But when Paul went full time in Corinth, Luke uses a different verb to describe his ministry...

*Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying that Jesus was the Christ.*

Acts 18:5

**“Reasoning”** is the language of debate, where **your arguments compete against my arguments**. I don't want to imply that there is no place for debate and careful reasoning, and **Justyn Terry** will spend an evening with us this Wednesday talking about the importance of **theological reasoning**. But I do want to note that **Paul didn't find it too effective** in the mission to Athens, and seemed to **change his style** by the time he got to Corinth.

In Corinth, the verb Luke uses to describe Paul's ministry is **'testifying'**. Testifying means to **bear witness to something you have seen**, to tell people what you know is true. Paul did that about Jesus. He told them what he knew was true about Jesus. He talked about his life and ministry and death and resurrection. He talked about how **everything comes from him** and is heading towards him, that he is the hope of every race and tongue and nations – and of every heart. Of how **forgiveness** comes through him, and **new life** comes through him, and **eternity** comes through him – and it does.

Here is how he described this shift in focus as he later wrote to the Corinthians...

*For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.*

1 Corinthians 2:2

In Corinth, Paul focused everything on Jesus and his cross, and he declared over and over again the facts of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. Perhaps he said something like this...

I stand here today and declare that Jesus Christ **forgives you** of every single thing that you thought could never be forgiven. And that it comes through his cross. Every single thing. Freely forgiven. Through his cross...

I declare to you today that Jesus Christ **frees you** from the dark little dungeon of living only for yourself. He **opens the doors wide** to a life lived in his grace, surging with his favor, healed by his love. And that it comes to you through his cross.

I declare to you today that Jesus Christ **gives you and brand new life**. One with joy and power and purpose. A fresh start. A new birth! And that it comes to you through his cross.

I declare to you today that he **gives you himself, forever**. That life with him stretches out into eternity, stronger than death. And that he himself comes to you through his cross.

There was a tremendous response...

*Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, and everyone in his household believed in the Lord. Many others in Corinth also heard Paul, became believers, and were baptized.*

Acts 18:8 (NLT)

But **still, Paul was anxious**, weak, lonely. That can happen – even when the tide turns your way! Then Jesus did something that settled his Apostle's heart...

*One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him, "Don't be afraid! Speak out! Don't be silent! For I am with you, and no one will attack and harm you, for many people in this city belong to me."*

Acts 18:9-10 (NLT)

This was what brought Paul through. And it will bring us through.

**My Presence** ("I am with you");

**My Protection** ("No one will harm you");

**My Purpose** (many people)

Do not be afraid. Keep speaking. Keep testifying.