

Acts 18:1-11

Dear Friends in Christ,

You know the promise God gave about his word through the Prophet Isaiah. You have heard it many times. Paul knew those words too. God's word is like rain and snow. Just as they don't fall to the ground without accomplishing God's purpose of watering the earth, so God's word will accomplish his purpose. It will not return to him empty.

We know the words but sometimes they are hard to believe. We work hard to do what God has asked us to do, to spread God's word like a sower sowing seed, but we don't seem to see many results. This has led to what has been called the "church growth movement." People have tried to take what is a miracle of God and redefine it, to make it into a science. They want to see results so they have studied churches that are growing and have tried to come up with some guidelines. "If you do these things then your church will grow." Our natural desire for tangible things, for measuring success in numbers, has led many to forsake the word and look for things that, at least outwardly, seem to work faster and better.

Imagine the temptation Paul must have faced. He lived in the shadow of Pentecost. He lived in a time when 3000 people were converted and baptized on one day, and the growth of the church was phenomenal. He himself had seen many people come to faith in Jesus as their savior. But, he also experienced a lot of disappointments. He was chased out of synagogues and even told by government officials to leave town. He was arrested, imprisoned, beaten and stoned, all because he was trying to tell people that God had sent the promised Messiah, Jesus.

Lately he had received a vision of a man from Macedonia begging him to come and help him. He went to Macedonia, but in the city of Philippi he was jailed. In Thessalonica a mob came to lynch him but didn't find him, and he escaped to Berea during the night. The mob from Thessalonica followed him there so he left and went to Athens. In Athens he had a wonderful opportunity, an opportunity to speak to a crowd of the leading men of Athens on the Areopagus. He caught their attention by telling them about a god they didn't know; but when he spoke of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead they **sneered** and refused to listen to him any longer, though a handful of people became believers. Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

It had been a rough time for mission work in what is now Greece. The city of Corinth didn't seem to be a field ripe for harvest either. It was kind of the Las Vegas, a sin city of the ancient world. The word Corinthianize was coined as a kind of euphemism for sexual immorality. When Paul arrived he didn't immediately dive in to mission work as he usually did. Instead, he found a day job. He had learned the tent making trade in his youth and he found a fellow Jew named Aquila who was practicing that trade and he joined him in his tent making business. We aren't told why he didn't devote himself to mission work at first. Maybe he was discouraged over the lack of outward success since he had arrived in Greece. Maybe he didn't think Corinth was a very good place to start a mission. Maybe he it was just that he had no money and had to work to support himself. Maybe it was a combination of all of these things. Jesus' encouragement to **stop being afraid**, to keep speaking in Corinth and not to be silent because he would not allow anyone to harm him, seems to indicate that Paul might have been discouraged with the lack of outward success and all the trouble God's word has brought him.

It's easy for us to get discouraged too. We hear the promise that God's word works, it doesn't return empty, and we do our best to share it with family and friends and neighbors, but it doesn't seem to do anything. Maybe it's a child or a family member. They have been in church

with us regularly. We have shared the word with them in family devotions, or personal conversations, but they just seem to ignore it and do their own thing. We make visits on people who are unchurched. We share law and gospel with them. Maybe they even say, "We'll see you on Sunday." But rarely does anyone show up. We try to share the truth of God's word with friends or neighbors and they respond by shaking their heads and making some comment about how old fashioned and out of touch and unenlightened we are. It's easy to get discouraged when you don't see any evidence that God's word is accomplishing its purpose. You see what seems to be seed falling on paths and rocks and among the weeds, but where is the seed on good ground that produces abundant fruit?

Jesus reminded Paul, and he reminds us, stop being afraid. Stop looking for outward success, for things you can see. Confess your lack of trust. Rejoice in your forgiveness in Jesus. Listen to the word yourself so that the seed planted in you grows and produces fruit. Trust God's promise. God's word always accomplishes his purpose.

When Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth and rejoined Paul we are told that Paul **devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ**. Before this he had only spoken in the Synagogues on the Sabbath. But now, possibly because Silas and Timothy brought with them some offerings to support his work, or because he was encouraged by the fact that he now had brothers in the ministry to help him, or some combination of these things and others, Paul devoted his full time to preaching the word.

His message wasn't fancy. He told those who were Jews as clearly as he could that the Messiah they were waiting for had come. His name was Jesus of Nazareth. If they wanted proof that this Jesus was the Messiah he would show them how he had fulfilled the prophecies of God's word, and that he had risen from the dead just as he has predicted he would. They could rejoice and be glad. Jesus had come and redeemed them from sin, death and Satan. But instead of believing this good news, they literally **blasphemed**. They spoke evil of Jesus and rejected him as their savior.

Had God's word accomplished his purpose? Yes. God had foretold that some who had his word but only as a formality, **who honored him with their lips but their hearts were far from him**, would hear the good news that the Messiah had come and instead of believing it, would be hardened in their unbelief by it. As much as we don't want to see this happen, it is true that sometimes the purpose that God's word accomplishes is Judgment. If the word is heard and constantly rejected, Jesus says **that very word** will be the judge on the last day. It will witness against those who heard it but refused to believe.

Paul quotes what God said through Ezekiel. He, and we who believe, are like watchmen, not dictators. If we fail to proclaim the word and someone ends up falling under God's judgment, we are responsible because we failed to proclaim the word. But, if we proclaimed the word and someone refused to listen, God will not hold us responsible. Our job is to proclaim not to force. We don't have the power to create faith in someone. We have to let that up to the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit uses the gospel which he calls on us to proclaim. Paul had proclaimed the good news that Jesus is the Messiah to the Jews in the Synagogue in Corinth. When they rejected the good news, he devoted his time to preaching and teaching those who would listen, mostly gentiles.

Being kicked out of another Synagogue certainly must have been disappointing for Paul. In Romans he talks about how it brings him to tears every time he thinks about how often his

fellow Jews reject salvation in Jesus. But, God opened a door for him that was wider than any that had been opened for him to this point in his ministry, and in that unlikely place, the sin city of the ancient world! He let Paul see some seed falling on good ground.

A man named Titius Justus heard the word and came to faith in Jesus. He had a large house right next door to the Synagogue. He invited Paul to use his house as a base for his ministry. Paul was able to use this house and preach and teach in Corinth for at least a year and a half, the longest he had been able to stay in any one place so far in his ministry.

God's word was accomplishing his purpose. Through the word faith had been worked in the heart of Titius Justus. And that faith was growing on good soil and producing fruit, moving him to open his home to Paul and support his ministry.

But that's not all. God's word had accomplished his purpose in the Synagogue, and not just the hardening some in their unbelief. A man named Crispus, a leader in the Synagogue, had come to faith in Jesus, and he and his entire household were baptized.

But that's not all. **Many of the Corinthians who heard (Paul point out their sins and point them to Jesus for forgiveness) believed and were baptized.**

But that's not all. When Jesus appeared to Paul and told him to stop being afraid and to keep on preaching the word, he told Paul **I have many people in this city.**

Who would have thought that Corinth, the sin city of the ancient world, would be a field ripe for harvest! But it was. Paul saw God's word accomplish his purpose.

Remember this incident from Paul's life when you are tempted to doubt God's promise that his word works. Remember this incident when you are tempted to look at a person or group of people and judge them by their apparent sinfulness as unworthy of hearing the word. Remember this incident when you are tempted to become discouraged because the seed you are sowing doesn't seem to be falling on good ground and producing fruit.

What does Jesus say? **Don't be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. I am with you always to the end of the age.** Sow the seed. Proclaim the word. Point out sin and then point to Jesus as the savior. Tell people what Jesus has done for you and what he means to you. Remember you are a sower, not a dictator. God's word may harden some who reject it in unbelief; but, when you least expect it, in the most unusual circumstances, God may let you see some abundant fruit as was the case with Paul in Corinth. But even if he doesn't, rejoice that his word is at work in you and trust his promise that his word will not return empty.