

Gospel Triumph: How to Persevere – Acts 18:1-17

I recently read an article that cited a study that said that “conscientiousness” is majorly in decline in our country, but the drop has been like going over a ledge for those 16-39 in the last 8-10 years. This means we are all struggling more with character qualities like “making plans and following through”, “persevering until finished”, and there’s been a sharp increase in the quality “is easily distracted”, but those under 40 have been impacted by this change in greater ways.

Now, unless you think this is a middle-aged guy wanting the chance to knock younger people, it isn’t. We’re all struggling with follow-through, distractions, and the ability to maintain commitment to something when it gets difficult. The study didn’t explore the reasons why this decline is taking place, just that it is, but it did mention some possibilities and they are the typical culprits, social media, smartphones, etc.

I bring this up to point out that this is a significant cultural trend and as believers we need to be aware of how we are changing along with the culture and actively take steps to lean into Scripture’s call to perseverance enabled by grace. I was reading in Colossians this week and I want you to notice how perseverance is connected to our initial reconciliation to God. Colossians 1:21-23. Notice the language, “not shifting from the hope of the gospel.” Stay at it because of the hope of the gospel of grace.

This brings us to Acts 18. In this chapter Paul travels from Athens to Corinth. Look at the first line of verse 1. So far in Paul’s journeys we’ve seen the typical pattern unfold in city after city and we’ve come to expect it. Paul goes to the synagogue. He preaches Christ. The Jews get mad, but some Jews and Gentiles believe. Eventually things get so heated that he has to leave the city and move on to the next one. This has been the pattern, but here in Acts 18 we get a surprise break in that pattern.

After the initial conflict with the Jews and the salvation of many Corinthians, God shows up to Paul in a vision. Look with me at verses 9-11. God says, stay put Paul. Keep going. Persevere. And while continuing Paul faces more difficulty in Corinth,

and yet keeps going, and the fruit multiplies. So, this morning in Acts 18:1-17 we are going to see **2 Cornerstones of Perseverance in Ministry and Life.**

1. The Community Around Us (vv. 1-8)

Look back again at verse 1. Last time we saw Paul by himself in Athens. He spoke at the Areopagus and a number of people came to faith in Christ. At some point he decides to leave Athens and make his way the short distance to Corinth.

Corinth was the major city of this region of the Roman Empire and really was just behind Alexandria and Rome in significance in the Empire itself. Corinth sits on a narrow piece of land that allowed people to harbor on one side, move their goods over land to the other side and then avoid the dangerous sea route around southern Greece. It was extremely wealthy, politically important, and had many immigrants from all over the empire. Paul meets two of these immigrants in verse 2.

Aquila and Priscilla had been living in Rome but had been kicked out of the city with all the other Jews by the Emperor. This event is mentioned in literature outside the Bible and would have been quite difficult on the couple. Can you imagine? Being forced to leave your home, job, friends, and everything that's comfortable to you, simply because you are Jewish? But in God's providence they end up in Corinth, probably already as believers in Christ, and become close associates of Paul's. Look at verse 3.

This is the only mention of Paul's work as a tentmaker in the NT, but we do read several times that he spent time working a job outside of ministry to not be a burden to these growing churches. As he begins his ministry in Corinth, his partnership with Aquila and Priscilla allows him to make the money he needs to live and continue to pursue active ministry of the Word. Look at verse 4.

This is the first time we read about Aquila and Priscilla in the NT, but they become close friends and ministry partners of Paul's. Listen to Romans 16:3-4 and 1 Corinthians 16:19. But obviously they aren't Paul's only associates. Look at verse 5.

We last saw Silas and Timothy in Berea back in 17:14. Paul went to Athens and called for them to come to him there. We don't know if they went to Athens and Paul had already left or if they came straight to Corinth. No matter. They are back with Paul and apparently something about their coming allows Paul to devote himself fully to the ministry of the Word. They may have brought financial resources from the churches in Macedonia. Listen to 2 Cor. 11:9.

But regardless of potential financial help, Paul had the encouragement and community of believers to help him, even when things got difficult. Look at verses 6-8. There's obviously a shift for Paul here in now focusing on the Gentiles. We saw this in chapter 13, but here Paul shifts his focus to the house right next door to the synagogue. This probably didn't go over that well, but the gospel continues to bear fruit and a church is born.

Now, here's the thing about Paul's ministry and relationships. No matter where he goes and what happens, he consistently builds these ministry relationships, and his letters are full of names of those he loves and has served with. The birth of the church in Corinth is no different and ultimately leads to two long letters. Listen to what Paul says about this church at the beginning of 1 Corinthians, even though he will have to confront them on several areas throughout both letters. 1 Cor. 1:4-9.

We live in a time of increasing isolation and loneliness, which is ironic because we have these technologies that are supposed to bring us together and foster community. Author David Brooks has a book called *How to Know a Person* and it has a chapter describing our current loneliness crisis which he calls "The Epidemic of Blindness." The blindness is that we just don't see one another. Here's what he says: *We live in an environment in which political animosities, technological dehumanization, and social breakdown undermine connection, strain friendships, erase intimacy, and foster distrust. We're living in the middle of some sort of vast emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis. It is as if people across society have lost the ability to see and understand one another, thus producing a culture that can be brutalizing and isolating.* – David Brooks

Perseverance in ministry and life requires real, genuine, personal relationships and our connection to one another in Christ provides the grace of these relationships all around us. Let's not bypass this gift from the Lord. Let's take advantage, like Paul did, and cultivate these deep and lasting ministry partnerships and friendships. Community is vital, but community can only be sustained by our second cornerstone of perseverance.

2. The Christ With Us (vv. 9-17)

We just saw the growth of the number of believers in Corinth in verse 8, right on the heels of the tension with the Jews and the synagogue in verses 6-7. This would typically be the time when Paul would leave and move onto the next city, but not this time. Look at verses 9-10.

We've seen visions in the book of Acts so far and they have all come at key points. Paul's vision on the road to Damascus. Peter's vision of the animals leading to his ministry to Cornelius and the other Gentiles. Paul's vision to cross over into Macedonia. Now the Lord gives Paul another direct vision and tells him not to go anywhere. Let's look at the specifics.

Do not be afraid. It can be easy to think of Paul as this sort of robotic super apostle, but he's a normal human being like the rest of us. The tension with the Jews would have been a potentially strong reason for fear for Paul. God reassures him and tells him to continue to do what he's been doing. Look again at verse 9. Continue to speak. In other words, keep teaching, preaching, encouraging, and challenging. Persevere with the gospel. Why can Paul persevere in the middle of a tough situation?

Look at verse 10 where God gives Paul two reasons. First, Christ the Lord is with Paul. This sounds like Psalm 23:4. Did you know that in Hebrew this line is the very middle line of the 23rd Psalm? Hebrew poets often structure their poems with the most vital line in the middle. This is the realization that summarizes the hope of the entire Bible. We are created to be with God, isolated from God by our sin, brought back into His presence with Christ, and will eternally dwell with Him on the new earth.

This is the promise of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 and is again implied in Acts 1:8. To be near to God is the highest joy and greatest comfort you or I can ever have. This promise to Paul of Christ's presence is simply confirming what is true for all of us. But notice the other reason Paul can persevere with confidence. Look at the end of verse 10.

Many had already believed as we saw in verse 8, but God still had more. This is amazing promise from God. Paul's job was to proclaim the gospel and do ministry and God would take care of actually saving people. Here's how one author put this:

Divine providence in election is not revealed in terms of mechanics or specifics - both known only to God - but is revealed to us in the Bible as something that lies with God completely and as something we may confidently believe. There is no hint of fatalism, much less a decreased motivation for preaching and evangelism. From what the Lord tells Paul, he may stay and preach with confidence. – Brian Vickers

And with these two promises, Paul perseveres. Look at verse 11. We haven't gotten specific time frames so far in Acts, but here Paul stays in one place for 18 months. And, it probably wasn't smooth sailing. No doubt the Jews were frustrated by the loss of the ruler of the synagogue and others. No doubt they saw the increasing influence of Paul and the message of Jesus as the Christ. I'm sure there were disputes and confrontations over the 18 months, but these ultimately culminated in verses 12-17. Look at verse 12. Achaia was the district that Corinth was in and Gallio was the proconsul over that whole region. What becomes of this attack? Look at verses 13-17.

The Jews are against Paul and it's not as if Rome is staunchly defending Paul. Gallio simply dismisses the case, but then does nothing to defend the ruler of the synagogue when he's beaten right in front of Gallio himself. But through all of this Paul is protected and the gospel continues to work. Notice the name of the ruler of the synagogue who is beaten.

Now I want to show you this in 1 Corinthians 1:1. We can't say for certain that this is the same individual, but it's likely the same guy. Paul's perseverance bore fruit, but Paul couldn't persevere in his own strength and ability. He was strengthened through the community and more importantly by Christ's presence and promise of success.

These same cornerstones hold true for you and I today and they hold for ministry as well as for other areas of life. Keep going because Christ is with you and the community is around you. Let's pray.