

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (21-11-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 18:1-11

Additional Bible Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Corinth evangelised

Introduction

From Athens, Paul travelled 40 miles west to Corinth. Athens was the cultural centre, and Corinth was the commercial centre. On a narrow isthmus, Corinth had two great harbours. Roads also merged there, so Roman soldiers, traders and business men were always passing through. The Isthmian Games were held there in honour of Poseidon, the god of the seas. The city also had political importance for it was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia.

Paul visited Corinth three times in all, and he wrote four letters to the church there (we only have the second and the fourth). The church established here gave him many headaches, and made demands on his ability and leadership. We are going to consider Paul's first visit, which lasted 18 months. Our focus is Paul's ministry, the kind of person he was, the message he preached, and the encouragement he received. Some of the things are not directly relevant to our needs, but there is something in the message for everyone.

The character which Paul displayed

We get the picture of an extremely busy man, spending and being spent for his Lord. He was busy with his pen, for it was while in Corinth that he wrote his two letters to the Thessalonians. He made no money from preaching and teaching, so he had to be busy with his hands, making tents (every Jewish rabbi had to have a trade), to maintain himself. Though Paul had the right to be maintained, he made the point several times that he preferred to maintain himself rather than be a burden to the struggling churches. Whether we have a salary in Christian work, or live by faith, there is a lesson here about being thoughtful to those on whom we depend.

So Paul was busy with the pen, and busy with his hands labouring. He was also busy with his heart and lips. He was burdened with the desire to preach God's Word, and he reasoned every Sabbath, trying to persuade the Jews and the Greeks. **I am compelled to preach** (1 Corinthians 9:16). It was a necessity laid on him. **Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel.** When the Jews rejected the message and blasphemed, Paul shook his clothes, to show he was clear of the responsibility, and their blood was on their own heads. Henceforth, he would preach to the Gentiles (Acts 18:6).

Happy the man or woman, preacher, Sunday School teacher, parent or witness who has made the way of salvation clear, who has presented Christ's claims without ambiguity, who has loved, pleaded, warned and lived out the message. If the listener has refused, it is his own responsibility, it is spiritual suicide. But on the last day he will not be able to say, "You failed me; you never told me."

John Harper (who died on the Titanic) was said to have believed what he preached and preached what he believed; God and eternal things were so real to him that he lived and preached “as if Christ died yesterday, rose today, and is coming again tomorrow.” Richard Baxter’s earnestness in preaching was explained, “He preached as if never sure he would preach again, a dying man to dying men.” There were no cold moral lessons from him given in an academic detached manner. His preaching was warm, earnest and real. He was free from the blood of all men.

The message Paul preached

The city of Corinth was one of Paul’s hardest assignments. It was the most licentious city in Greece, hence the proverb “To live as a Corinthian”, implying an immoral life. The Corinthian was always portrayed as the drunkard on the Greek stage, and the Corinthian girl was a prostitute. The whole system of evil was bound up with religion. The 1000 priestesses in the Temple of Aphrodite by day were the chief entertainers in the city by night. No wonder Paul felt the odds were against him, and he came in fear and trembling (1 Corinthians 2:3).

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2) – this was Paul’s message. It was his one and only message, whether he was speaking to Jew or Gentile, moral or immoral, religious or irreligious. The one thing which mattered in time and eternity was a man’s relationship with God. He was lost because of his sin, whether he was respectable or not, he was under condemnation, and helpless to save self.

Such is God’s love for every man. The answer to man’s need is Christ’s sin-bearing death. All sins – vice, ungodliness, pride and self-righteousness - are laid on Him. On the grounds of His death, you can be forgiven, reconciled to God, have new life, become a child of God, have your destiny changed from hell to heaven. Hate sin, live for God, the old man, i.e. the old self, is brought to an end. The new man has new power to live a God-honouring, holy life.

The sense of debt is the strongest emotion in the New Testament. If the truth of it sinks in, it changes the whole life. James Denney said, “Whoever says He bore our sins, says substitution. Whoever says substitution speaks of an immeasurable debt to the Christian.”

There was no other message Paul could bring to Corinth, with its culture, morality and philosophy. There was no other message they needed to hear, other than how to be right with God, how to be filled with the life and power of God, how to clear the debts of the past, hate sin, and live unto Christ.

And it remains the only message to deal with our own day and generation. Education is not the answer, neither are moral precepts and social values. The root of trouble is human sin, and the only power strong enough to deal with it is divine grace. We are all alike, whether lost in vulgar and vile, or “respectable” sins.

One day a lady of high fashion listened to Rowland Hill preaching to a vast audience in the open air. She told her coachman to stop the carriage, and she asked the preacher, “Do I understand that I need to be saved as much as my coachman on the

box?" "Precisely, madam, there is no difference in the sight of God between you and him." She tossed her head, "Then I will never be saved. Drive on, John" – and she drove on – to hell.

*"O wonder of all wonders
That through Thy death for me
My open sins, my secret sins,
Can all forgiven be."*

The encouragement Paul received

It was an uphill and heart-breaking task. Often Paul was downcast. Amidst the persecution of the Jews, and the problems of awkward and difficult church members, Paul had great need of assurance and comfort and support. And the Lord graciously supplied this in two ways – human source and divine source.

A married couple, Priscilla and Aquilla (unusual for the woman's name to come first, but maybe she was the more gifted or the stronger character), who had been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius with the rest of the Jews, welcomed Paul into their home and supported him. Later they moved with him to Ephesus on the third missionary journey, where they instructed Apollos, leading him into deeper understanding of the Gospel, making him more able to witness and preach (Acts 18:18,26,28). In Corinth the church met in Priscilla and Aquilla's house (1 Corinthians 16:19), and Paul described them as **my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me** (Romans 16:3,4).

This couple were totally consecrated to the Lord and to the Gospel. They encouraged, taught and opened their home. There is a place for all kinds of people, single as well as married, to follow their example. But there is no doubt of the blessing to the work of God and to preachers of a consecrated marriage. Christian families are the backbone of the church. Their homes are a haven of peace and security.

There was also divine aid to give Paul encouragement when he needed it. **One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."** (Acts 18:9,10). With that assurance, Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching the Word of the Lord. God's plan was not going to be set aside by man's opposition. God had His people there – a reference to election, **For those God foreknew he also predestined** (Romans 8:29). They were not yet saved, so Paul had to stay on and preach and bring in the promised harvest.

If God has placed us in a situation and in circumstances, our confidence is that, as we go, there is a sure harvest to be reaped. The Lord's presence will go with us, protecting and blessing the message. When God gives a task, He promises His presence and power to do it. In the presence and power of God we find courage, strength and power to persevere, to keep on keeping on.

So through life God comes to us again and again, directing and heartening. John G.Paton, missionary to the cannibal islands of the South Seas, wrote, "Without the abiding consciousness of the presence and power of my dear Lord and Saviour,

nothing else could have preserved me from losing my reason and perishing miserably. I felt His supporting power as Paul did when I cried, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' Oh the bliss of seeing Him who is invisible."

Conclusion

Paul's service was thorough, conscientious and faithful. His message was Christ, and for support he knew the encouragement of fellow Christians and the Lord Himself.