

Do you ever wonder if God cares for you? I don't mean that in a big, lofty theological sense where we all would, as a said in the firm, of course he cares. I mean, do you ever wonder if God cares for you, if he is truly able to take care of you, if he wants to take care of you?

The law of averages would say that in this little fellowship here, there are a few. If not more, than a few people confronting circumstances in life that would pose that sort of question. Does God really care? Is God able to take care of me? Well, our text this morning in Acts 18, I hope, will provide you with an answer and with encouragement.

We are journeying through the Book of Acts. Last week, Paul was in Athens. He was speaking first in the marketplace and then in the area off Agus to the Stoics into the Epicureans and whoever else would listen to it. After his speech, he left Athens and traveled some 50 miles west of the city of Corinth. Athens, you remember, was a city that had already peaked and was past its prime in glory.

It was relatively small in size. Corinth, on the other hand, was a true city, the largest and the most diverse city in all of Greece. It was uniquely located to receive trade both from the sea and the land and travelers from all over the world. It was in the words of one commentator, commercial, cosmopolitan and corrupt. The morals in Corinth were lax.

The city was known for its tempo of prostitution and overall sexual promiscuity, so that the phrase to live like a Corinthian would eventually come simply to mean to live immorally.

Preaching the truth in a place like Corinth would be an uphill climb. And yet, not surprisingly, that is exactly what the Apostle Paul has come to the city to do.

Paul seems to be alone in Corinth. He's been without his helpers, Silas and Timothy, since he left Berea. So he's in this big city by himself. Being alone sometimes can have its upsides. But F.p. Meyer rightly knows being alone in ministry can make a difficult job even more difficult. In our passage for the day, we find hints that Paul might be feeling the weight of his work, the difficulty of the job that is set before him.

And in the first letter he wrote to the church that would eventually be established in Corinth, we find some proof. First Corinthians two three, he wrote, I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling. Well, we might be prone to think of the Apostle Paul as this spiritual powerhouse, as bold and commanding, which he could be.

But here we see that he is not. He really hasn't come to Corinth to kick the doors in and take the city by storm. He has been through a lot already on his first missionary journey, and this is his second. And once again, he's facing a great challenge. He's alone. He's in a he's in a city he doesn't know among people he doesn't know with no place to stay and probably little to no money.

It makes sense that he was feeling weak and fearful, and yet God had led him to where he was. I wonder if you have noticed, Christian, God does not always lead us into comfortable places. He doesn't always put us in those environments where we can right away feel at home or be confident or be assured, feeling weak and afraid and nervous in over our heads, out of our leagues, unfit for the task and adequate for the work.

However, we want to put it. You may experience those feelings, those thoughts. None of that means you're in the wrong place or that you're doing the wrong thing. There are times like these when one must, and I think providentially has no choice but to fully rely on God. And the testimony of this passage today from Acts 18 is that God cares and that God takes care of those who follow Him in obedience into these hard places.

Be not dismayed. Will there be time? God will take care of you. The hymn writer says, beneath his wings of love abide. God will take care of you no matter what may be the test. God will take care of you. Lean, weary one upon his breath. God will take care of you. God will take care of you through every day or all the way.

He will take care of you. God will take care of you. Our Father. We humble ourselves. Now, before your word, all become hungering and thirsting for its truth. For its meaning, help us to receive it and planted in our hearts that it might do the work you intend. Making us more and more like Jesus. We pray and ask in His name.

Amen. One of the first ways that God took care of Paul was by giving him some companions. If you have your Bibles open, you're following along here in verse two. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife, Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome, and he went to see them.

Priscilla and Aquila were a couple. Paul could relate to on multiple levels. First, they shared a common heritage being Jewish. They shared common experiences, each being forced to leave places because of their faith. And they share a common trait. God took care of Paul in this big city by giving him some companions. And then we see right away he blessed Paul with a job, verse three.

And because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked for. They were tent makers by trade. Don't know how you feel about work, but work has always been a part of God's design for his people. And Paul was not afraid of it. He did not flashes. I'm an apostle credentials, expecting everybody to give him a free pass in order to get out of manual labor. In fact, he would later write to the Thessalonians four. You yourselves know how you ought to imitate us because we were not idle when we were with you. Nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it. But with toil and labor. We worked night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate, or even when we were with you, we would give you this command. If anyone is not willing to work. Let him not eat. The admonition in that last verse is against idleness. It's against laziness. Paul doesn't say, If anyone can't work, let him not eat. We are supposed to have families are supposed to churches are supposed to take care of those who cannot work, who cannot provide for themselves. But if one is able and not willing, then his hunger should inspire him to change his ways.

Paul was willing to work and God provided him with companions and a job and a place to stay as he worked with his hands to support himself through the week on the Sabbath. Paul made his way to the synagogue in verse four, where he spent his time trying to persuade the Jews and the God fearing Greeks about Jesus.

That was his pattern, both to visit the synagogues first, to share with them the news about Jesus, and also to relentlessly proclaim the Gospel wherever he went. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia and caught up with their friend Paul, they found him as they would have expected to immersed in missionary work occupied with a word testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

You might recall the response to preaching the Gospel in Athens was kind of meager. A few believed, even though he had a great audience. But the response to the preaching, the gospel in Corinth, in the synagogue, at least, was worse. Worse than meager. It is hostile, and we could

surmise from the text that it was consistently hostile, that Paul was consistently confronted and belittled and and struggles.

Verse six When they opposed and reviled him, they opposed and reviled him. He shook out his garments and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads. I'm innocent. From now on, I'm going to the Gentiles. You ever get to a point, maybe when you're talking with somebody about Jesus that you just get exasperated because they're not interested and and they will make fun of you or push back on you or do you ever get there?

No, none of you. I'm the only one. Okay. Just me. And it's hard to know sometimes in someone's preaching. Is that a rhetorical question, or am I supposed to ask that? I'm curious because that's what's going on. Paul is trying and he's trying and he's trying. But he's coming up against it. And not only is he not meeting with any success, he's being ridiculed and opposed and reviled for for his trying.

And so he shakes out his garments, which doesn't mean much to us in Ellsworth, Maine, in 2023. But it reminds us, remember when Jesus told his disciples, He said, When you go out and you're preaching the gospel and you go into any town, if they will not receive you, if they will not listen to you, remember what he told them to do.

Shake the dust off your sandals. So shaking out the garment is very similar to what Jesus instructed the disciples do. Shake the dust off your sandals, which is just a way of saying a very demonstrable figurative way of saying, That's it, I'm done. And that's what Paul is doing. He shakes out the garment. He's saying, That's it, I'm done.

Because he has found that the old adage is true. You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. You can lead. You can try to lead a person to Jesus. You can show a person Jesus. You can invite. You can invite a person to Jesus, but you cannot make that person receive Jesus. It's exasperating.

Sometimes it's frustrating. And Paul has done this. He has shown Christ. He has he has tried to lead people to Christ. He has invited people to Christ and he has nothing to show for it. But opponents and hostility. He rightly states that their blood is on their own heads, and the reason that he rightly states that is something we all should be mindful of.

Everyone who has heard the gospel is going to be accountable for what they do with it. Once you have heard the gospel, you are accountable for what you do with it, and God is interested to know from you on a day of judgment, what did you do with my son? How did you respond to my son? And we saw back in Athens that there were basically three responses.

The folks rejected it, some delayed and a few received. Those are the common responses to the gospel and those who delay. That's the group that I'm I'm fascinated with because it's the well, I'll get to it when I get a moment kind of thinking. And again, I want to reiterate, we never know how many moments we have. It's not going to work to get to heaven and say, well, I was thinking about it.

God, what did you do with my son? Paul is right. I've shared the gospel. I've told you the truth about Jesus. You're going to be responsible for God, what you do with it. So Paul says that he's done with the Jews. Again, you can relate to that experience. I'm all done with this. This is moving on. Does mean he's always done with the Jews.

It doesn't mean that he's going to stop preaching to the Jews. We carry on very quickly. You're going to see now he's back to the old pattern. So what this is talking about is his ministry in Corinth. What he has found is that there's really no possibility of good ministry here to the Jews

in. And so he's going to pivot and he's going to move to the Gentiles or just the way of, say, the non-Jewish people.

And there there he is. Seems to have always gotten a better reception. Anyway, he's pivoting to the non-Jewish population. He's concluded there's nothing to be gained by his continued efforts in the Jewish community. The old Scottish preacher, Alexander McLaren, wrote this. He said, Better to learn the lessons taught by Providence and to try a new claim than to keep on digging in Washington.

And we only find sand in mud. I like his allusion here to mining and to sluicing. It makes me think this past summer on our family vacation, we went over to western Maine and over there we did some digging and sluicing and it was at Bethel Outdoor Adventures. I don't know if anybody's ever experienced this or not, but if you've got little as I would, I would encourage it. And we don't have littles, by the way. We're all but we have we have we have the next generation of littles is what we have, which is even more fun. No offense. It just is. It's just true. Grandkids are just so awesome. The kids are great. They're even greater when they bring you more kids. If you're not interested in that.

So we're at Bethel Outdoor Adventures in actually someone already done the digging for us. You don't have to go out into the earth and dig the earth out. They actually bring it to you in buckets, which is kind of nice, and you just buy the buckets. If you want a bucket with big bucket, a little bucket, medium bucket, you can get two buckets.

You get ten buckets by the buckets, how many kids you have by plenty of buckets. You sluice it out. And as we put that dirt in the tray and we moved it around under all that running water, moving water, the sand washes out. And if you're fortunate when you do that and we were fortunate, these pretty rocks and occasional gems begin to appear.

And that was a ton of fun. It would not have been fun if we weren't rewarded from time to time with some sparkly little treasures. So the thing if one were sifting through all that stuff, bucket after bucket, even hour after hour and push it in the day after day and seeing nothing at all of encouragement or interest, that's what McLaren is talking about.

That is what it was like for the Apostle Paul in those moments. This is what Paul is running up against in multiple fruitless attempts and in the synagogue to win these Jewish worshipers to Jesus. So McLaren continues. God teaches us by failures as well as by successes. Let us not be too conceited to learn the lesson or to confess defeat and shift our ground accordingly.

Paul shifts his ground. I'm done here. I'm going over there and he goes to a house of a man named Tissus Eustace, a worshiper of God. He apparently didn't go very far, though. His house was next door to the synagogue and God blessed Paul there with people who are willing to hear and receive what he had to say.

Verse eight Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believe in the Lord together with his entire household. There's not a lot here about a man named Crispus, though we can know that if he was a ruler of the Jewish synagogue and came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, that his life was going to be forever changed on the spiritual level and he would need to look for a new job. Think that through. Now, when Crispus said yes to Jesus, he was surely putting his whole life in Christ hands and saying, I will follow you wherever you take me. He was dependent on Jesus. At that point, his whole household was saved. We read. And so he tells his wife, Pack up the van because we're in for a new adventure.

I throw those in just to make sure you're away. Not only this, but somebody is going. I don't think they had a van back there, you know, not only Crispus, but his whole family. And many of the Corinthians hearing. Paul believed and were baptized versus 9 to 10. It's an interesting little insertion here. It almost seems arbitrary, but we know that's not how God's word works. Everything in the Bible is there on purpose. It serves a purpose. We have to figure out what that is. And the Lord said to Paul. One night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I'm with you and no one will attack you to harm you. For I have many in this city who are my people?

What is this all about? But I think it is another way for us to see how God is taking care of His servant who at the time either feels or runs the risk of feeling overwhelmed by the work that is in front of him. The Lord himself spoke to Paul. This is going to be a voice that Paul would recognize.

He has heard it before. Remember, this time the Lord comes to him in a vision and says, Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. So let's think this through. God doesn't waste words like God's not like you or me. You stumble around to find the right words. When God speaks, He speaks on purpose for a purpose, right? And he says, Don't be afraid.

If he's telling Paul not to be fearful. Why do you think that is? Because he's afraid. He's either afraid in the moment or he runs the risk of becoming fearful. And God wants to cut that off and say, You don't need to be that way. Don't be afraid. By the way, God has all the authority in the world to command us how to feel, because you'll hear this from time to time.

You can't tell me how to feel. Well, God can, and he does. Don't be afraid. The Lord gives you a simple command. Don't do it. Instead, rather than withdraw, rather than isolate yourself it rather than being shut down in fear, which is what the enemy wants from Paul and wants from us. God tells Paul, Go on speaking and do not be silent.

Keep on keeping on. That's the message. Don't let the critics. Don't let the opponents. Don't let the saber rattlers intimidate you. Don't let them convince you to stop sharing the gospel. That's the word of the vision. And then next, the Lord graciously provides the how and why. Because that would be a natural place to go. If God gives us the command, we want to know how am I going to do that, or why should I do that?

God provides it, he says to the Apostle. Essentially, he says, You can do this, you can carry on, you can be bold, you can be fearless, You can keep talking and sharing the gospel. You can be faithful. Paul, Because I am with you. This really, to me, is the crux of this passage. I am with you. Does that sound familiar to you?

It probably should. At the end of Matthew's gospel, remember, the resurrected Lord is talking to his disciples in what we call the Great Commission about going out and making more disciples. You remember what Jesus said to those men. Matthew 28:20 He says, Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. What is Jesus sending His disciples out with the assurance of His presence?

This is what you need. This is what you need to carry on. This is what you need. A true sense that God true. He's with you, Christian. God is with you. God is with you. So how do you persist? How do you stay faithful in life when the results are mixed, when your strength is failing, when opposition is rising?

What does God want you to remember? He's with you. That's how David makes it. Through the the ominous valley of the shadow of death and Psalm 23, Even though I walk through the valley

of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil y for thou art with me. I don't have to be afraid because, God, you are with me.

You and I will struggle, I'm sure, and have a hard time relating to the sort of challenges that the Apostle Paul was up against. We can't really appreciate what he was facing, the depth, breadth or magnitude of any of that stuff, what it was ever like to be him. We might not be able to get there realistically, and in our modern lives, but we do know, don't we, what it's like to be tempted to fear.

We do know that to be overwhelmed, to be discouraged, even to be beaten down. We know what it's like sometimes to come to the end of our strength, to rage at our weaknesses and our limitations, to throw up our hands in exasperation and say, I can't do this. And it's very often a true statement by yourself. You cannot do this.

But we love it. Christian, you are never by yourself. God is with you. God reminds Paul of that most important truth that we do well to remember Also, I am with you. Others may in fact, some already had. And by the time we get to the end of Paul's earthly ministry, others will have abandoned. But God says to his serve in this moment, I'm not leaving.

I will not leave you. And he makes a specific promise that likely addresses a concern brewing in Paul's mind, and no one will attack you to harm you. It would be fair, I think, to say that part of Paul's consternation, part of Paul's fear and trembling and sense of weakness in Corinth lay in a very real threat to his life.

He was he was literally sticking his neck out. And he has he has already been stoned. The stoning is not an action taken by stoning is not an action one takes to warn somebody. Okay. There's one intent for stoning, and that is to kill the person you throw on the rocks. And it isn't to shoot one across the bow and say, maybe that'll settle him down.

Paul has been through this. The people who were with him thought he was dead, but he survived. And here it seems again, understanding God's seas into his heart. Paul will benefit from the assurance of his life's preservation. He's in danger, but God wants him to know no one's going to harm you because your time is not yet. Your time is not yet.

So in Corinth, God pledges to keep Paul safe. Not only will the Lord keep the apostles safe in this vision, he gives them some insight that He could He could not otherwise have. Another reason God says to keep on preaching and teaching in Corinth is because verse ten, I have many in this city who are my people. I have many in the city who are my people.

And it probably didn't look that way. It probably didn't look that way. But you do understand, I think, friend, that every one of us in this earth sits in an unobstructed view seat. Do you ever buy tickets in obstructed view seat? Whatever's going on out there isn't what you see. That's what it means. My dad and I had tickets to a hockey game at the old garden.

It was so high up I got a nosebleed. But we getting up there, no wonder they were free. But anyway, as I look down upon the rink, I couldn't even see the goal. We were so high up you couldn't even see the goal on our end. That was an unobstructed view seat. None of us can see everything perfectly or rightly.

And so when God says to Paul, I have many in the city who are my people, He didn't look that way. He couldn't see it that way. He just had to believe. Remember, Corinth is a hub of commerce, of politics and immorality. People there are widely given to the pursuit of money, manipulation and culturally sanctioned promiscuity upwards of 750,000 people.

Paul is surrounded with. And for all of his efforts, he's proportionately getting very little return. Only a few new believers responding to his preaching. And yet the Lord knows this. I have many in the city who are my people. You see, God sees what we do not. There are souls yet to be one for him. There's a reason, Paul, for you to stay on the field.

There's a reason for you to continue. There are individuals here. There are men. There are women. There are children who, in the words of Jude, must be snatched out of the fire. And Paul's the person to do it. There were many yet to be saved. And you know what? The same may be true in our town. Be true in our families, may be true in our work.

And this alone is reason to persevere and not surrender our witness in these places, the Bible says in the book of Romans Chapter ten, for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him, of whom they have never heard?

And how are they to hear without someone preaching? How will these people in Corinth ever have a chance? If you shut your mouth, if you back down, if you cave in, God wants us to preach. God wants us to share the gospel. And after this vision, Luke tells us verse 11, Paul State It must have been a pretty compelling vision.

Paul stayed a year and six months teaching the Word of God among them. That's a short version of Paul's time in Corinth. I think when we're just reading through like on a reading plan, we might say, Well, that's just a cute little snippet, a little bit of a history lesson. The implications of the texts might be hard to discern or they might not jump right out at us.

So I want to recap them as we close, Paul arrived in Corinth alone, without friends, with no place to stay, unemployed and without help. And God took care of him. God bless him. With companions in Aquila and Priscilla, God blessed him with a job. God provided a roof over his head. God's sent Silas and Timothy to join him in the world.

Paul was having little evangelistic success. He shifted his ground from preaching to the Jews and pivoted to the Gentiles. We can say he decided to cast his net on the other side of the boat. After a season of catching nothing and God blessed him with new believers. Paul was opposed and he was feeling weak and tempted to be afraid.

God blessed him with a vision and an assuring word. Brothers and sisters, this account of Paul and Corinth is much more than a history lesson. It is a testimony to God's faithfulness. It is a testimony to God's commitment. It is an encouragement. It should be an encouragement to us in our inevitable seasons of fear and trembling in weakness.

It is an encouragement to us to stay the course. James Montgomery Boys summarizes this account by writing We cannot take a text like this and simply transfer it to ourselves as if God is saying the identical things to us. Nobody will ever attack you, nobody will harm you. I have many people in the city. However, I cannot help but think that if God has placed us in a particular place, it is because He has a work for us to do there.

And for that very reason we should be encouraged and stay on and do it to the best of our ability. It is not because he does not have many people in our neighborhoods or cities, but because he does. Our job is to keep on keeping on, knowing that God is with us.