

# Where is God in all this?

## 26 July - Paul

**Strength and hope:** Living in the light of the resurrection

*Notes and discussion questions for home groups or personal study – Brian Bull*

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### Readings      Key verses

Job 14:1-17	“If a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come.”
2 Cor 4:6-18	“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”
Luke 9:18-25	“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?”

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### Background

The Apostle Paul rarely spoke about all the hardships that he faced for the sake of his service for the Gospel of Christ, but Paul does defend his ministry in 2 Corinthians 11 by cataloguing the kind of dangers he experienced. You might like to read a few verses from Paul’s testimony in **2 Corinthians 11:24-27**.

One thing Paul doesn’t mentioned specifically here is that he often suffered alone – he was the only apostle with a specific mission to the gentile nations and constantly had to justify and defend his ministry against sceptics and Judaisers.

Yet Paul never allowed any of these dangers to turn him away from God’s purpose for his life, even in his final years under house arrest in Rome.

- What difficulties and hardships have you faced that challenged your faith?
- What helped you to cope with these difficulties and retain your faith in God?

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### Paul in Athens (Act 17:16-34)

Paul visited Athens during his second missionary journey. Here is a brief summary of events leading up to his Athens visit.

- Paul and Silas travel through Asia minor visiting churches that Paul established on his first missionary journey. In Lystra Timothy becomes part of Paul’s ministry team (Acts 16:1-5)
- Paul plans to visit Ephesus, but God redirects him to Macedonia, where he establishes a thriving Christian community at Philippi. (Acts 16:6-40)
- From there they travel to Thessalonica. Some Jews and many God-fearing Greeks believe, but the Jews oppose them and cause a riot. The believers send Paul and Silas on to Berea for their safety. (Acts 17:1-10)
- Paul and Silas have a successful ministry in Berea, but Jews from Thessalonica follow them and again stir up trouble. (Acts 17:11-13)
- Paul is smuggled out of Berea at night, and put on a boat to Athens. Silas and Timothy stay on in Berea to encourage the believers, and plan to join him as soon as they can. (Acts 17:14-15)

So Paul is alone, in a strange city, in a different culture, with no moral or spiritual support.

- What does **Acts 17:16** tell us about Pauls’ initial impressions?

Everything must have seemed strange, unfamiliar, disorientating – very much like we all feel in our current lockdown situation.

- Have you ever found yourself in a similar position to Paul?
- What made you most uncomfortable?
- Did you manage to become more familiar and at ease in the new environment?... How did that happen?

Paul began his ministry in Athens as he usually did, by speaking at the Jewish synagogue. He preached in the public square. He debated with the philosophers. He was invited to address the city’s High Council and preached his famous sermon on Mars Hill. (Acts 17:22-31)

But what was the result of all Paul’s efforts?

### Read Acts 17:32-34, 18:1

- What was the reaction of the Greek philosophers to Paul’s message?
- Was there any follow-up from the meeting at the Areopagus?
- What response (positive or negative) came from the Jewish community?
- How much progress was made in establishing a church in Athens?... in identifying church leaders?

Everywhere that Paul went (except here) Paul's message brought a powerful response – sometimes very positive, resulting in the establishment of a worshipping, praying community (as in Philippi and Thessalonica), sometime very negative, with opposition, riots, and even with Paul being stoned and left for dead. Often (as in Thessalonica and Berea) a mixture of both.

In Athens the response seems to be either ridicule (from the philosophers) or apathy. There were those from the City Council who said they wanted to discuss matters further, but no indication those discussions ever happened.

The fact that Paul left Athens of his own accord, without establishing a functioning church (the record lists a few individual believers but no established structure or leadership) suggests that he was depressed, despondent, and saw no point carrying on. He didn't even bother waiting for Silas and Timothy to catch up with him.

## Lockdown blues

Being isolated during lockdown, and learning to cope with new ways of shopping, doing business, relating to family and friends and worshipping over zoom, has inevitably been a disorienting experience – as if we were coping in a new country and learning new customs and behaviour.

- What aspects of the lockdown and responses to coronavirus have you found most difficult to cope with?
- Have you, like Paul felt disoriented and depressed by being isolated for long periods of time?
- Have you been able to keep yourself busy and fulfilled?... or felt, like Paul, that everything has been kept “on hold” and life has become unproductive?

## Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-11)

Paul had a very hard time when he first arrived in Corinth. He was practically thrown out of the synagogue. But soon Silas and Timothy caught up with him. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and his whole family believed, and a new church was born.

God spoke to Paul and told him:

*"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)*

God gave Paul one and a half very productive and very enjoyable years in Corinth, which restored his faith, gave him time to recover physically and emotionally from his roller-coaster experiences in Macedonia, and provided him with new friends and colleagues, Aquila and Priscilla, who worked alongside him sharing the Gospel of Christ.

God told Paul *“I am with you”*.

- How would this promise change Paul's viewpoint after being so badly treated in Macedonia and discouraged by his time in Athens?
- How does God's presence with us help us cope with difficult times?
- God had good times planned for Paul as well as difficult ones. What good experiences do you have to look forward to?

## Lighting our path through difficult times

Read **2 Corinthians 4:6-18**

God says, *“Let light shine out of darkness”* (v.6)

- What kind of light are we talking about here?
- Where does this light come from?

Paul tells us that we carry the precious light of God in “jars of clay” (v.7)

- Why does God give us weak and imperfect human bodies so that we often fail to meet our own expectations?

Paul promises that even though we go through hard times, we will never be completely overwhelmed (v. 8-10).

- What helps to keep going, however hard the struggles?
- What do our “light and momentary troubles” achieve for us? (v.17)

## Final thought

God never criticised Paul for his lack of success. What God requires of us is not productivity but obedience. God tells Paul in Acts 18:9, *“keep on speaking, do not be silent”*. The response (or lack of it) is God's concern, not ours.

Let's pray for those who find it difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel. May we, like Paul, continue to shine the light of Christ in the world around us and offer a message of hope and faith in a loving God.