

Acts

Acts 18:1-17 - “Keep calm and carry on”

In Athens Paul gets to explain to the aristocratic members of the Areopagus council that the “unknown god” he’d found an altar to in their city could actually be known. And very personally too, because we humans are, in fact, God’s very own children, so why not prove it by reaching out to him and discovering he’s more than willing to respond. And in so doing discover he set up a plan for us humans that he placed in the hands of a man who would make absolutely sure that plan worked. And the proof that such a man existed with that kind of power was his resurrection from the dead (Acts 17:18, 31).

Well, this was such a shocking concept for these very proud intellectuals that only a few of them believed it, and only one man and one woman mentioned by name too. Not surprisingly, then, Paul leaves Athens and heads due west for the two day journey to Corinth, which, like Athens, he’d never visited before either. So, again, he had no idea what would happen when he got there, and especially in a proud city like Corinth with its reputation as a great trading centre, but also for its infatuation with sex, and, like Athens, for its worship of a goddess whose temple also had pride of place on a hill.

Paul was in for a nice surprise in Corinth right off the bat, though, because in **Acts 18:2** “he met a Jew named Aquila” and wife Priscilla, who’d recently moved to the city from Italy, due to the Roman Emperor Claudius ordering all Jews to leave Rome. Paul got a nice second surprise too, because Aquila and his wife were in the tent making business, so Paul, sharing the same skill not only worked in their business with them, he also stayed with them (verse 3). But “every Sabbath” he set aside for his usual trip to the Jewish synagogue in a new city to “try and persuade” both Jews and Greeks attending that Jesus was the Messiah sent by God to fulfill every good news prophecy in the Jewish Scriptures (verse 4-5).

And as usual he got the same response. But in Corinth it was the other way round, because instead of lots of people believing his message and the Jews then ganging up against him, the Jews ganged up against him right away. They “opposed Paul and became abusive,” **verse 6**, and so unreasonable did they become that Paul “shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads. I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’”

Well, even for Paul this was unusual, because he'd suffered similar abuse from Jews in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:45-46), Iconium (14:2-3), Thessalonica (17:5), and Berea (17:13), but this time he did the equivalent of swivelling on his feet, turning his back on them and out the door he swooshed, well and truly slamming it behind him to get the point across he was having nothing more to do with them.

You mean we can do this kind of thing as Christians? Well apparently so, but what brought it about? There's a clue in **1 Corinthians 1:23**, where Paul writes, "we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews."

"Stumbling block" is an understatement. The Jews hated the mention of Jesus being crucified because they'd been the ones who'd crucified him, and that proved just how stupid and gullible they'd been. But to admit it was way too much for their pride. And now **we get to see what pride does**: it creates hatred so strong that it pours out in a torrent of savage language and totally deranged accusations. And no amount of reasoning or obvious facts has the slightest effect. To these people Paul was an odious, repugnant, evil menace to society that deserved to be sneered at, publicly humiliated and, if possible, silenced, put away or even killed.

Worse still these Jews were Paul's fellow countrymen, "family" if you please, believers in the same God, fellow workers in the salvation of the world (Isaiah 49:6). That salvation had now been made possible by Jesus' resurrection too, and Paul was giving his life and energy to spreading that message. But these Jews were totally unreceptive. They weren't interested, even though **Jesus' death had included them** in being forgiven for their blindness and stupidity.

So that meant they weren't interested in **other** people hearing that message either and realizing **they'd** been forgiven too. These Jews, then, were literally telling God they weren't their brother's keeper (just like Cain). And when Paul realized that he didn't hesitate in telling them they would face dark days. They'd made their bed and now they were going to have to lie in it and take whatever they had coming to them. And if they lost their lives, well their "blood was on their own heads."

This was serious stuff, because it had everything to do with the responsibility GOD had given them as Jews, and now they had the proof of Jesus' resurrection to contend with too. And it was all laid out in their own scriptures too, as Paul had clearly shown them, so they knew what their job and responsibility was. Paul's reaction is worth taking note of, then, severe though it may seem to be.

Paul told them, “I am clear of my responsibility,” **verse 6**. He’d done the job God had called him to do, and to the people God had sent him to as well - to the Jews first and then the Gentiles. It was in a real twist of almost humorous proportions, then, that when Paul said he was turning his back on those Jews in the synagogue and going to the Gentiles instead, the Gentile he first went to lived in the house next door (**verse 7**) - that probably shared a wall with the synagogue too. And in an added twist, “Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord,” which gave Paul access to the synagogue still, and from his continued teaching there “many of the Corinthians believed” (**verse 8**).

But in turning his back on the unbelieving Jews, wasn’t Paul being a bit high-minded too? When he told them, “Well, if you don’t believe me, I’m having nothing more to do with you,” it doesn’t sound very Christian, does it? It creates the impression that Paul was short on patience and didn’t put up with opposing views lightly. But it wasn’t that way at all, as we see in **verse 9**, because “One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, keep on speaking, do not be silent.’”

You mean, Paul actually needed a vision from God to calm him down? Yes, because Paul was that scared. He admitted it too, in **1 Corinthians 2:3**, when he wrote, “I came to you (Corinthians) in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.” He knew by now that when lots of people responded to his message it made things worse for him, because it only aroused the anger even more in those his message had shown to be wrong and stupid. And in so many cities it had happened that way. So Paul knew his life hung on a knife edge. Either a mob would quickly develop that wanted him dead, or the authorities would blame him for rabble rousing and have him flogged or thrown in jail to rot.

Paul knew from brutal experience, therefore, what proud people were capable of. He admits they drove him into “despairing of life,” **2 Corinthians 1:8**. What was the point in carrying on when back in **Acts 18:12** “the Jews made a united attack on Paul,” had him hauled into court, and accused him of “persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law” (**verse 13**).

Where on earth did that come from? Paul was doing no such thing. In **verse 11** he was simply “teaching the word of God,” the plain facts and truth from God’s word, **verse 5**, “that Jesus was the Christ (or Messiah)” in and through whom all those wonderful prophecies in their scriptures were being fulfilled. But the Jews didn’t care about that. Their pride had been stung and they wanted revenge. They wanted Paul hung from the closest lamp post; so they’d say or do anything to make Paul look like a dangerous menace to society.

In such a scary situation, then, what did God do? He spoke to Paul in a dream, **verse 9**. He said, “Don’t be afraid, keep on speaking, do not be silent,” or in our terms today, “**Keep calm and carry on.**” And God then reassured him in **verse 10** that he was with Paul and would protect him, “because I have many people in this city,” and it would be through Paul’s continued “teaching of the word of God” (verse 11) that he would reach them. So, stay calm, Paul, and carry on doing what you’re doing, because it’s working.

Armed with that encouragement from God, Paul was about to answer the charges the Jews had brought against him, but before he could say a word in his defence, Gallio - the Roman governor and presiding court judge - in another rather humorous twist, immediately turned on the Jews who were accusing Paul, in essence saying to them, “I’ve had enough of this nonsense. What exactly is the crime here? It’s just you Jews making a fuss about someone breaking your law, which has nothing to do with me. Go settle the matter between yourselves. Court dismissed” (verses 14-16).

The Jews were so angry with this verdict that “they all turned on Sosthenes” their synagogue ruler, who’d led the prosecution against Paul, and they beat him up right there in the court room. It was like a bar room brawl, but Gallio didn’t bang his gavel yelling “Order in court,” he just watched, a bit bemused I would think, but totally unconcerned otherwise (verse 17).

Sosthenes, by the way, had replaced Crispus as the synagogue ruler after Crispus had taken Paul’s teaching on board, and in yet another ironic twist, the beating Sosthenes got in the courtroom led to his eyes being opened to Paul’s teaching too, and in 1 Corinthians 1:1 he’s now working with Paul personally.

So what we’ve got here in Acts 18 so far is people so entrenched in their beliefs that any hint of them being wrong or gullible only dug them deeper in defence of their views. Worse still their hurt pride spilled out in naked hatred, savage verbal abuse, and false accusations aimed at officially silencing Paul. Paul realized there was nothing he could do to change their minds, or wake them up to the job God had given them, so he let them know he wasn’t wasting any more of his time on them, which meant more serious trouble for him, and he admitted to being scared. And so scared that God pulled off all sorts of ironic and even humorous help to calm Paul down and keep him carrying on, because through Paul’s steady and continued teaching for the next one and half years there would be “many” Corinthians who believed (verse 8).

All very encouraging for any Christian in a crazy, scary world, because in such a world God simply says, “Keep calm and carry on” regardless.