

Moving On

Acts 18:1-11 (NIV)

¹ After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. ⁴ Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. ⁵ When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. ⁶ But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." ⁷ Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. ⁸ Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized. ⁹ One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." ¹¹ So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

Utah is the first place I have lived where I have had to have a sprinkler system for my lawn. Didn't have one growing up. The first home I owned was in Michigan, and there I had the attitude that if God wanted the grass to be green, he would send rain. Now I live in a desert. That grass needs to be maintained. It needs to be watered regularly because we can easily go more than a month without a good rain storm.

Now that I water my lawn, I get puzzled when I notice brown blades of grass appearing. The first assumption is that the grass is not getting enough water. So, I test the sprinklers to see if they are all working properly and call Steve Vander Wal if some of them aren't. (God bless you, Steve.) If the dry looking grass persists or worsens, I also watch to see how much sun that area of the lawn is getting. If it gets sun constantly throughout the day, I adjust the sprinkler settings to give it a bit more water. If it still gets worse, I think about the height of my mower, am I cutting it too short? After that, if the grass is still dying, I don't really know what's going on. So, I start asking people to try to figure it out. Eventually, though, if none of my solutions work, I move on.

When do I move on? With grass, the answer to that question seems fairly inconsequential in the broad scheme of life. But what about asking that question when it comes to sharing God's Word with people? The apostle Paul had to constantly ask himself this question while on his missionary journeys. He tended to follow a pattern of starting at the local synagogues with the Jews, his people, moving then to the Gentiles, the non-Jews, establishing a local congregation with leadership and then moving on – unless he was forced out earlier. He was a church planter more than he was a church sustainer, not sticking around too long.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, the ministry didn't look a whole lot different from the other places he has just come from and had planted churches at. He had some initial local support from the husband wife team of Aquila and Priscilla. And Paul followed his normal ministry pattern: "Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" (verse 4) while at the same time he supported himself via his profession as tentmaker.

After Silas and Timothy arrived to support Paul, he was able to "devote himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah." (verse 5) Paul nearly always started with the local Jews because they would have the background knowledge of the Old Testament of the Bible. They would know the promises of God coming to rescue them, to defeat the devil, to remove their sin from them, and restore them to a right relationship with God. Paul came to the Jews to bridge the gap, to show them that Jesus is that promised Messiah, the one who came and completed that task of taking away the sins of the world and had made them right with God. That Messiah, that Jesus, who is both true God and true Man, rose from the dead, conquering death itself and now lives and rules over all things on their behalf.

But these Jews "opposed Paul and became abusive." (verse 6) They should have gotten the message. They should have believed. Instead, they were the packed down walking path that Jesus explained in his parable: "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path." (Matthew 13:19) Paul knew what to do next. It was time to move on. "He shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'" (verse 6)

When it comes to sharing our faith and our God with others, when is it time to move on? This is a hard and sad question to ask. The God we believe in, is awesome. He has provided total and free salvation for everyone. He has taken away our sins. He has made us perfect by his works. He has given us the inheritance of heaven. He has given me something to live for, a dawning of light even in the darkest of days. He is my Rock and Refuge, the one thing, the one person who never changes and always keeps his Word. I want others to have him too!

It's because you love God that you tell others about him, that you invite them to come to church with you, that you keep sharing him. You plant, and you water, just like Paul. But sometimes it seems like God's Word, faith in your God, does not take root. It feels like you are casting the message of your God, who he is and what he has done for you, on the hardened, packed down dirt of the path. The person either doesn't get it or doesn't want it. That seed of God's Word then gets snatched away. It feels like God's Word returns to you empty.

How many times do you go back and have that conversation again? How many more times do you extend that invitation for someone to get to know your awesome God? When do you move on, like Paul did? Is it when they make fun of you for believing in that God of the Bible? Is it when they slam the door in your face? Is it when they stop returning your phone calls, don't answer your texts, unfriend you on Facebook? Is it when they politely and sweetly say, "No, thank you. I'm good."?

There's no magic rule when it comes to how long or how many times you keep sowing that message of God and what he has done to heal you from your sins and take them away forever. Sometimes it may be one and done. Sometimes you may do this for years, always giving it just one more shot. The longer, though, that it goes on the greater the temptation it is to think that God's Word is no good, that it's ineffective, that it has returned to you empty. Is this person just a hard-packed path kind of soil, like Jesus described? Is it time to move on?

The sad reality is that as we tell people about our God and the awesome things he has done, some will reject us and our God. They will refuse to listen – sometimes politely, sometimes passive aggressively, sometimes violently or abusively. Every rejection of God makes your heart ache. Maybe you're mad or dumbfounded at first but eventually there is an ache because you know that they are refusing the perfection that God has won for them as well as the eternal rest of heaven. You move on, having been rejected.

Paul moved on from those Jews. Really, he moved on from his own people, almost like moving on from family and friends. He went on to the Gentiles. He preached that message again that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the one who takes our sins away and makes us perfect before God. And people listened this time. Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord. Many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized. This was the good soil Jesus talked about! These are people who heard God's Word, who God is, what he had done to save them from their sin, and they understood it. They believed it. The Holy Spirit brought them to faith, and they rejoiced in this newfound belief, in God.

God's Word brought about a fruitful return. The church was set up. Everything was looking good. Paul was again contemplating, "Is it time to move on?" Should he go plant more churches? This time, though, God intervened: 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." So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. (verses 9-11) God wanted Paul to stay and keep preaching his Word, to point people to Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the one who takes away the sins of the world and makes us perfect before God. God even promised to protect Paul while he did this. It was not time to move on.

For all of us at some point it is time to move on and share God with someone else, a time to stop trying to make that dead patch of grass come back to life. You planted. You watered. You move on. You move on, but in another way you never move on because you keep that person in your prayers. You ask the Holy Spirit to work on them, to break through that hard-packed soil that keeps them from understanding and believing in God and what he has done to save them from their sins. You hold God to his Word. He said that his Word will not return to him empty. So even though you are done planting, you keep praying that the Holy Spirit work on them. You know that sometimes you don't see immediate results from sharing your God with others. Sometimes it takes weeks, months, years. It may happen after you move on, but God makes sure that his Word never returns empty.

Since God's Word never returns empty, we keep sharing him with others. We keep sharing Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the one who conquered the devil, who lived a perfect life in our place, died for our sins, and rose again from the dead conquering death itself. He has made us right and perfect with God. We plant that seed. We water it by continuing to share our God and what he has done for you. And when the time comes to move on, we put our trust in God that his Word will not return empty. Amen.