

Pass Me A Cup of Water

Acts 17:1-17

Rev. Curtis J. Young

October 12, 2008

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Only time will tell, but it certainly appears that the entire world may be headed for troubled economic times. I turned to the news yesterday morning to read: “The Dow lost more than 18% of its value this week, suffering its worst percentage drop in its 112-year history.”

Everywhere I read of a loss of confidence. First there was the loss of confidence in the mortgage industry, then in the government’s ability to solve the problem, and now in investment markets around the world.

The question is raised how can people get their confidence back? That’s a good question, but I think there is a more fundamental question: What is your confidence in?

The Bible (Hebrews 13:8) says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.”

Can that be said of anything else: An industry, an economy, a nation, the entire world order? I don’t think so.

To say Jesus is the same “yesterday, today and forever” is to say he is always faithful. He has not forsaken us in the past. He is not forsaking us today. He will not forsake us in the future. As our Savior he will meet our needs. Our confidence belongs in him.

Do you remember in the Sermon on the Mount how Jesus began his instruction in prayer? “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. So he proceeded to teach them to pray in regard to themselves, “Give us this day, our daily bread.”

Jesus was teaching us to pray for what theologian call sustaining grace, grace to end each day not only with our bodies fed, but with all our needs met – spiritual, emotional, relational, and physical.

Jesus didn’t regard our life as separated into two parts, the part God cares about and the part he doesn’t. He regarded the entire life of each one of us as significant, with God our Creator caring for every aspect of our being, and with us trusting him in everything and for everything. It, too, proceeds from the cross.

Sustaining grace. We speak of saving grace, the grace of God through Christ’s atoning sacrifice for our sins so that we are forgiven and receive eternal life. We speak of sanctifying grace, the work of God’s Spirit in us by which we are grown and matured in Christ. Today we focus on God’s sustaining grace.

These are not three graces but three aspects of God’s grace, of his promise to deal with us not according to our sins but according to his love. And this morning, we focus on that aspect of his grace and kindness that enables us to survive every day.

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I find that the most wonderful promise of God's sustaining grace are in Isaiah: (46: 3-4): "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain of the house of Israel, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."

Just as the Lord assured Israel, "I am he...I am he who will sustain you," Jesus concluded the Great Commission by saying, "And lo, I am with you to the very end of the age." Here is Jesus' own assurance that he will sustain us.

I hope it is obvious what this all has to do with us, but it may not be so obvious what all this has to do with Acts 18, and the Apostle Paul. In fact this introduction was inspired by our verses. As I read them I could not help but see them as Luke's reflection on how well the Lord sustained Paul when he was in a low place.

You think you have it bad? Paul arrived in Corinth friendless, broke, and, I think, discouraged by the results of his ministry in Athens.

Friendless. Silas and Timothy were still up north in Macedonia. Paul got off the bus pretty much with the shirt on his back, alone in a city of 200,000 people, but not a single person who cared if he lived or died.

Have you ever arrived alone in a foreign city, with no one to help you, no place to stay and no way to pay for it? Corinth was the capital of Achaia, and a greatest center of commerce in Greece (It actually boasted two harbors and two ports).

Though there weren't as many shrines in Corinth as in Athens, it was just as much under idols. Towering on a hill 2,000 feet above the city was one of the wonders of the ancient world, the temple dedicated to the goddess of love Venus, or Aphrodite. Every night 1,000 temple slaves came down to the city as prostitutes. This must have felt so alien.

Broke. We have coined the term "tentmaker" from this text for Christians who are self-supporting in nations where they would be forbidden to enter as missionaries. Paul made and repaired tents because he had no money.

Discouraged. For all the care and effort he had put into addressing the intellectual leaders of the Gentile world in Athens, the results had been meager. Some had believed, but of all the cities where Paul had ministered, he left Athens without an established church.

Can the worldview of these pagans ever be cracked? Can such pride ever be humbled to accept a crucified Savior?

In addition to all these things, Paul was in danger. He faced the prospect of more violent opposition. Antagonism among the Jews had been growing, becoming better organized and more violent. Yet the way he could share Christ was by exposing himself openly and boldly to the very group, his fellow Jews, from whom that opposition came.

I wonder if Paul thought Athens was going to be the end of the line. Apart from the Lord sustaining him, it could have been. But the Lord did sustain him. I suspect this kind of care is a higher priority for him than we think.

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He taught, "If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward." (Matthew 10:42)

After Paul arrived in Corinth, the Lord supplied him with cup after cup of cold water. Verse 2 says he met a Jew named Aquila. What Luke actually wrote was that Paul found Aquila. Like a thirsty man finds an oasis in the desert, or a miner finds gold in a stream, or a man who is cold and wet finds a fire, Paul found Aquila.

By the grace of God, Aquila and Priscilla were there to be found. They were Jewish Christians who had left Rome because of an edict by Claudius to expel the Jews in AD 48 and settled in Corinth.

In them Paul found not only employment but a home and hospitality, a brother and sister, and ministry partners.

Do you remember how Jesus' responded to his disciples when they became fearful saying, "We have left everything to follow you!", "no one who has left home or brother or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age...and with them persecutions, and in the age to come, eternal life. (Mark 10:28-30)

Paul experienced this sustaining grace firsthand.

Then Silas and Timothy finally arrived. What a reunion that must have been! The text tells us that from that point Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching. Years later, in II Corinthians 11:9 Paul recalled why. Silas and Timothy brought with them gifts from the Macedonian churches to support Paul in his ministry.

A cup of cold water is not soon forgotten. "Give us this day, our daily bread."

As Paul focused on ministry, Jewish opposition intensified. (6) Paul drew from Ezekiel's own words after he had faithfully warned Judah of its downfall yet Judah refused to repent: "Your blood be on your own heads!" (6)

He must have felt a certain dread as he waited for the other shoe to drop. It was just a matter of time before an assault. Yet here was another occasion for Paul to experience God's sustaining grace.

Isaiah wrote of the Lord as the one who knows the word to sustain the weary. (Is. 50:4) Verse 9 says, "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 for a year and a half..."

One more example of God's sustaining grace deserves comment. The Jews did attack Paul. Luke calls it "a united attack." This was to be it, a knock out punch not only for Paul and the church in Corinth, but for all Christians everywhere in the empire. Gallio, proconsul of Achaia, was respected and influential. His brother was Seneca, the Stoic philosopher hired to tutor young Nero. His decision would be precedent that other proconsuls and legates would follow. So the charge was made, Christianity was illicit, an illegal religion.

Verse 14 begins, "Just as Paul was about to speak." Just as Paul was gathering up his resolve to speak... Just as he was breathing a final prayer to the rhythm of his pounding heart...

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But he never got the chance. By the grace of God, it wasn't even necessary. The great judge, Gallio himself, responded first. He dismissed the charges as frivolous. The ensuing beating of the synagogue ruler, Sosthenes, to which Gallio turned a blind eye, served to doubly to warn the Jews against trying to use Roman power to oppose the church. They would taste the injustice they sought for the Christians.

Perhaps Paul sang the Psalmist's song. "Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings..." (Ps. 3:7) Or more familiar to us, perhaps he sang the 23rd Psalm: "You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows."

So, cared for, supplied, and defended, Paul continued to testify of Christ, and the Lord's words were fulfilled. He did have many people in that city. Many came to faith.

His testimony years later, in chains, would be, "And my God shall supply all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

I urge you this morning to take this assurance of God's sustaining grace to heart. Further, I urge you to be the Lord's sustaining grace to others. Recall how often the Lord sustained Paul through other believers – Aquila, Priscilla, Silas, Timothy, and the churches in Macedonia. How many times Paul would go on to commend those who had, as he put it, refreshed his heart! (cf. Philemon 1:20)

A cup of cold water to a sufferer may seem too small a thing to offer. Simple acts of generosity and kindness -- a visit, a message in a card, a call, a meal – can prove so deeply sustaining. They are not to be taken lightly, especially when the Lord takes such notice of them.

It is because of God's sustaining grace that we may be hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."

By the comforts, encouragements, and help of sustaining grace, the world comes to see that the all-surpassing power by which we stand is from God, not from us. (II Cor. 4:8-9)

It is a vital part of our Christian testimony. Be confident in it!