

“Do Not Be Afraid, but God on Speaking”

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Acts 18:1–11 (ESV)

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Today, we return to our study of the book of Acts. Acts tells us the history of the earliest years of Christianity, from the time when Jesus ascended into heaven after dying on the cross and rising from the grave, to the time when the apostle Paul is imprisoned in Rome, preaching the message of Christianity to all who will listen. But the book of Acts is more than just the story of thirty important years of history. Acts tells us something about how we should tell others about Jesus. It tells us about how the church should function. And it tells us how to live as Christians.

Today, we’re going to see how Paul, Jesus’ specially commissioned messenger, preaches about Jesus in the city of Corinth. As we do so, we’re going to think more about evangelism. Now, if you’re here today and you’re not a Christian, you might not understand what evangelism is. So let me explain it. Evangelism is the action of telling people the “evangel,” or good news. (“Evangel” is simply a transliterated form of a Greek word that means “good news.”) We also call this good news “the gospel.” So evangelical Christians are Christians who believe this good

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

news and who are committed to telling other people this good news. In fact, I would say there simply is no other type of Christian than an evangelical one. But today “evangelical” has often been used to refer to a group of voters and its meaning is often lost or distorted. So when I say “evangelism,” I’m talking about the task of telling other people the good news.

What is this good news? Well, it’s the best news, really. It’s the message about Jesus. It’s a message about who he is and what he’s done. But we can only understand this good news within the framework of some bad news. The bad news is that we have all turned away from the God who made us for himself. God made us to represent him and love him and worship him. And he made a good world where his people would do those things. But from the beginning, people have turned away from God. They haven’t trusted him. They haven’t listened to him. They’ve ignored him. They’ve walked away from him. Because we as a whole have turned away from God, we have walked away from the source of life and goodness. Because of that, there are bad things in the world: fighting, famine, disease, murders, war, and death of all kinds. We can’t fix these problems in any permanent or ultimate way. That’s bad news.

But the good news is that God came to get us, to fix things that we broke. God sent his Son, Jesus. He is the only one who has truly represented and honored and obeyed and loved God perfectly. He did this for us, because we can’t do these things for ourselves. And though he was and is perfect in every way, and perfectly innocent, he was put to death in our place. To be clear, he did this voluntarily. He sacrificed himself so that our rebellion against God could be put to death without us being put to death. He bore the sins of his people when he died on the cross, so that all the sins of God’s people are forgiven. Not only that, but he rose from the grave on the third day after he died. He rose in an indestructible body, one that can never die again. He did this to show he defeated sin and death. He did this to show that his death indeed paid for all the sins of his people—he did the time for us in the prison of the tomb and he walked out a free man. He also did this to show what God will do in the future, when all of his people are raised from the grave. Jesus’ resurrection was the first installment of God’s resurrection of his creation. Someday, Jesus will return to make all things right. All of his people will have resurrected, indestructible bodies and they will live with God forever in a perfect world that will have no more fighting, famine, disease, pain, loneliness, boredom, frustration, depression, and, yes, no more death.

That’s great news. It’s the best of news.

You may be wondering who Jesus' people are. They are the ones who turn to him in faith. "Faith" simply means "trust." Jesus' people are the ones who trust he is true, that he is both God and the only human being who has ever lived a perfect life. They are the ones who trust that his perfect life and his death and resurrection opened up the only way for us to be reconciled to God and to have eternal life. They are the ones who love Jesus and follow him and obey him.

That is, in short, the gospel. It's great news. It's a message that gives our lives meaning and hope. It's a message that brings life and peace. And because it's such good news, we want other people to know it.

That's why evangelism is important. And that's why I've been preaching through Acts. I want us to know what the gospel is and how to explain it to others so their lives can be changed by this good news. And I want us to know what the earliest Christians faced because we are facing similar things now. Today, I want us to see that in evangelism, four things are important: our place, God's promise, God's provision, and our perseverance.

But if you're here today and you're not a Christian, or if you're here today and you're not much of an evangelist, this message is still for you. Even if you're not into evangelism right now, I want you know that your place, God's promise, God's provision, and your perseverance are very relevant issues. I explain why as we go.

So, without further ado, let's consider that first point: our place. To do that, we'll consider a bit of the place Paul found himself in Acts 18. Let's read the first four verses:

¹ After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² 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, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

The place where Paul found himself was the city of Corinth. After being in Athens, Paul heads to Corinth, which was the biggest and most important city in the province of Achaia, or what is now Greece. Corinth was the capital city of this province and a center of commerce. It had a key location: it was on an isthmus, or a land bridge, between the two parts of Achaia. It had two ports, one to the west and one to the east. That meant that a lot of people did business there. The city was known for its bronze. It was also where the Isthmian Games were played every two

years. They were second only to the Olympic Games. Every four years, the Imperial and Caesarean Games were held there. Many people visited the city for these events.

Corinth was also a place where there were a number of idols. The most famous was Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty, and fertility. There was a temple devoted to her that overlooked the city. Actually, there were three temples of Aphrodite in the city. (“Where do you worship?” “Oh, I worship at the First Congregational Temple of Aphrodite. How about you?”) And there were many other goddesses and gods, such as Hera, Demeter, Dionysius, and so on. Corinth was also known for its sexual licentiousness. The city was known for prostitutes and it’s possible that sex was bound up with the worship of some of these idols.

The point of explaining all this is to show that Paul decided to go to a large, influential, cosmopolitan, and immoral city. He had a habit of visiting cities like this because that’s where the most people were. That’s where he could find people who needed to hear the good news about Jesus. He went to a city full of tourists, business, sports, idolatry, and sex. Maybe that sounds a bit familiar. Really, not much has changed. We have plenty of cities that are similar.

Paul didn’t just go into that city. He went, as he often did, to the synagogue. That’s where Jewish people like Paul worshiped. Paul knew that he could go there and explain from the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the promised, anointed king who would come to rule over Israel and the world. Paul reasoned with his fellow Jews. He tried to persuade them. He went where people would be open to ideas.

That’s what Paul did in Athens. He went to the synagogue and the marketplace, which was where new ideas were talked about. In Corinth, Paul didn’t go to a marketplace, but he did have to leave the synagogue and go to another location. Let’s read about that in verses 5-8:

⁵ When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶ And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” ⁷ And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. ⁸ Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.

After Paul preached at the synagogue for a while, he was met with some resistance. Some unbelieving Jews “opposed and reviled him.” In response, Paul “shook out his garments,” as if to

say, “I’m done with you.” It’s similar to what Jesus said about an evangelist shaking the dust off of his feet if he isn’t received (Matt. 10:14; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; Acts 13:51). As an evangelist, Paul did his job. He explained the gospel. He reasoned. He tried to persuade. If people didn’t believe his message, their blood was on their own heads.² Evangelists aren’t responsible for results. They need to be faithful in telling people the truth and making the best case for the good news of Jesus.

Notice that when Paul leaves the synagogue, he doesn’t go far. In fact, he goes right next door. He starts teaching in the house of a man named Titius Justus, who was a Gentile who believed in the God of Israel. When Paul kept teaching there, the leader of the synagogue, a man named Crispus, became a Christian. His whole family did. (Paul mentions baptizing Crispus in 1 Cor. 1:14).

It’s pretty bold of Paul to be more or less kicked out of the synagogue only to take up preaching right next door. But if he hadn’t done that, Crispus and his family might not have come to faith in Jesus. Paul knew he had to be where the people were.

And that’s the same for us. If we’re going to reach people, we need to be in places where people are. We can’t wait for people to come to us. For some of us, a good “place” to be where people are is the Internet. If you’re online, you can write the gospel to people. You can send people links to sermons or articles. If you’re on social media like Facebook, you can post Scripture and links or thoughts you have. I realize not everyone here may have a computer or want one, but everyone can access the Internet through the local public library. The Internet may be the marketplace of today.

I do think there are some limitations to the Internet, however. It’s a bit impersonal. It doesn’t put us face-to-face with others. I think it’s better to be around people. For some of us, that’s hard to do at this point in our lives. But for those of us who can get out, we should try to find ways to be around non-Christians. Too often, particularly in the twentieth century, Christians in America retreated to safe spaces. Instead of being in cities like Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, we moved to the suburbs. Christian colleges, universities, magazines, and denominational offices moved away from major cities. When that happened, Christians lost a lot of influence in this nation.

² This concept is also found in Ezek. 33:1-9.

I don't know what that might look like for you. Recently, I saw that the library was hosting a discussion at a restaurant in town. I saw the advertisement for it on Facebook and I decided to go. We watched a TED Talk, a video about science, and then we discussed it. I didn't get a chance to launch into a discussion of the gospel, but there are going to be meetings like this once a month and I have decided I should go to these things. In fact, on Thursday, when this event took place, I really didn't want to go. I sort of had to force myself to get there. We're going to have to step out of our comfort zones a bit in order to be around non-Christians. Paul went to cities full of idols and immorality.

Wherever we are, God can use us. He has put us in this time and place. He has a purpose for us being here. Pray to God to show you what his purpose is for your living here and now.

So being in the right place is important. Something else that is important—more important—is God's promise to us. Jesus made a promise to Paul, one that encouraged him to keep doing the hard work of evangelism. Let's read verses 9-11:

⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." ¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

Here, Jesus appears to Paul in a dream and gives him an important message. He tells him not to be afraid. I believe that is the most repeated command in the whole Bible. Jesus tells Paul, "Stop being afraid." His words suggest that Paul had some fear. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He tells Paul to keep speaking and not to be silent. Why should Paul not fear? Because Jesus is with him. Not only that, Jesus says that no one will harm Paul. And, finally, Jesus tells Paul that there are many in Corinth who will come to faith in him. That's what Jesus means when he says there are "many in this city who are my people." In Acts 13:48, Luke, the author of this book, tells us, "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." In that case, God had appointed some to belief in Antioch in Psidia, and they came to faith. God has predestined some people to become his people. Jesus says this to Paul as an encouragement, to let him know that his work wasn't done. Jesus wants Paul to know that he needs to keep preaching in order to reach those people. Because Paul was encouraged, he was able to stay a year and a half in this city where he experienced some conflict.

Now, we need to be clear about this when we read the book of Acts, or any of the Bible, really: Not all the promises in the Bible are for us and to us. Jesus told Paul that no one would

harm him in Corinth. That is not a promise to me or to you. That was a promise to one man in one time and place. But we are told again and again in the Bible not to fear. Paul asked this rhetorical question in Romans 8:31: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” In that passage, Paul doesn’t say, “No one will harm you.” But he says,

³⁸For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul says not even death can separate God’s people from God’s love. He doesn’t promise us we won’t die, but he promises us that the worst that can happen to us is death. Paul would eventually die for his faith. Perhaps he knew his life would end that way.

Jesus knows a thing or two about death. He knew firsthand that death is not the worst thing that can happen. He experienced death on the cross. And he lived to tell the tale. When we die, we won’t experience what Jesus did. When he was on the cross, he was experiencing hell on earth. God’s righteous judgment on sin fell squarely upon him. He experienced alienation from the Father for the first time in his existence. But Christians won’t experience that. We can trust Jesus when he tells us not to fear. There is no greater authority to tell us that message. And the one who tells us is one who has been there. If my young sons say, “Daddy, don’t worry,” I could think to myself, “Sons, you don’t know how evil and cruel this world can be.” But if Jesus tells me, “Brian, don’t be afraid,” he’s not saying that because he thinks life is a cakewalk. He was put to death. He was beaten, and nailed to a cross. He bled and died. But he’s saying to us, “Trust me, death isn’t the end of the story. The worst anyone can do to you is kill you. But everything will work out in the end.” Jesus’ life sets the pattern for Christians’ lives: death and then resurrection.

Jesus also promises us that he will be with us. He told his disciples, after he rose from the grave and before he ascended into heaven, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Christians are never alone because Jesus is with them by means of the Holy Spirit. The power of God is with us.

And though Jesus hasn’t said to us, “I have many people in West Bridgewater (or Brockton, or Easton, or Massachusetts) who will come to faith in me,” I trust that Jesus does have many people here who will come to faith in him.

All of this should encourage us in our evangelism. Jesus tells us not to be afraid, even when we share the gospel with people who may seem opposed to us. He tells us he is with us, even when we're alone among a group of non-Christians. And we trust that we should keep telling people about Jesus because some of these people will come to faith.

And even apart from evangelism, we should be comforted by the fact that Jesus tells us not to fear and that we're not alone. All of us face fear and loneliness. But if we have a relationship with Jesus, we know that we can go through tough times and not be destroyed. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, for Jesus is with us (Ps. 23:4). For I am sure that neither job loss nor cancer, nor terrorist attacks nor evil politicians, nor persecution nor death, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So our place and God's promise are important to evangelism and our lives. So is God's provision. Christians in the past used to talk more about God's Providence. Providence means that God provides for us. He guides and directs our lives so that we get what we need, even if we don't see it coming or understand what is happening. God provided for Paul. We've actually already seen that. We're told that Paul was aided by a Jewish man named Aquila and his wife Priscilla, who were Christians who had just come to Corinth from Rome. They came because the emperor, Claudius, expelled the Jews to leave the city (verse 2). We know from other sources outside the Bible that this event happened in the year before Paul arrived in Corinth.³ Apparently, some Christians in Rome were preaching to Jews, and the unbelieving Jews were creating a disturbance. We're also told that this couple just so happened to have the same trade that Paul had: they were tentmakers. In a city with a lot of visitors, making tents for people to stay in was a good occupation. It seems that this couple hosted Paul and helped him. So God provided hosts and co-workers for Paul.

We're told that Paul's other co-workers, Silas and Timothy, came to Paul from Macedonia, which was the province where the city Philippi was. Luke doesn't tell us this, but Silas and Timothy brought money from the Christians in Philippi to Paul (2 Cor. 11:9; Phil.

³ The expulsion happened in the year 49; Paul arrived in Corinth in the year 50. Suetonius, a Roman historian, writes, "He banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus."³ That's obviously a reference to Jesus Christ. C. Suetonius Tranquillus, *Claudius 25*, in *Suetonius: The Lives of the Twelve Caesars; An English Translation, Augmented with the Biographies of Contemporary Statesmen, Orators, Poets, and Other Associates*, edited by Alexander Thomson (Medford, MA: Gebbie & Co., 1889).

4:16). Paul was willing to work, but being given money helped him focus on teaching Scripture (verses 5, 11).

We're told more about God's provision for Paul in the next few verses. Let's read verses 12-17:

¹² But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, ¹³ saying, "This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law." ¹⁴ But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. ¹⁵ But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things." ¹⁶ And he drove them from the tribunal. ¹⁷ And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.

When Paul didn't leave the city, the unbelieving Jewish people decide to attack him again by going to the governor of the province, a man named Gallio.⁴ These Jews say that Paul is persuading people "to worship God contrary to the law." It's not clear if they mean the Jewish law or the Roman law. Perhaps there's an intentional ambiguity there. Paul taught that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish law, which meant that certain Jewish worship practices had to change. And Paul taught that there is only one God and that Jesus is Lord. This would have put him at odds with the polytheistic Roman Empire, which declared that Caesar was lord. At any rate, Paul was going to defend himself, but before he could say anything, Gallio speaks. He says that Paul is not doing anything wrong or vicious. In Gallio's view, the dispute between Paul and these unbelieving Jews is "a matter of questions about words and names and your own law." Gallio says this isn't something he's going to judge. He decides not to get involved.

Then something strange happens. The crowd takes Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and they beat him in front of Gallio. It's not clear if the crowd consists of Jews or Gentiles. The earliest and best manuscripts just say "all," though the King James Version says "the Greeks." If it was the Gentiles who beat up Sosthenes, it was because the Jews were creating a disturbance in the city. If the Jews beat up Sosthenes, it was because they thought he

⁴ We know from other sources that Gallio became governor in the year 51, about a year after Paul arrived. Gallio was the brother of the philosopher and politician, Seneca. This and the detail about Claudius expelling the Jews from Rome show that Luke is a careful and accurate historian. This is not a legend Luke has created. This is a true account of what happened in the church, rooted in history.

failed in his attempt to get Paul in trouble with the Romans. Gallio again decides not to get involved.

It seems clear that God spared Paul from trouble during this time. Paul could easily have been arrested, but Gallio lets him go free. It's not that Gallio is such a noble figure. Remember, he turns a blind eye to the beating poor old Sosthenes received. This shows that God can use even wicked rulers to deliver his people. He has done it throughout history.

God may not provide for us in the same ways as we try to share the gospel. We do trust that he will provide for this church as long as we're faithful. We should pray that he would provide for us as individuals as we share the gospel. He may not get us out of political trouble the way he did with Paul. Remember, Paul would eventually be put to death by the Roman Empire. But God will give us what we need.

We should pray that God would give us people to help this church share the gospel. We could use some Aquilas, Priscillas, Silases, and Timothys. We should pray that God would continue to provide financial resources. And we should pray that God would continue to grant us religious liberty. While we have religious liberty, we should make the most of it.

You may not know this, but Russia has put in place a new law that makes any religious activity that's not sanctioned by the government illegal. That means there can be no unofficial, "house churches," and no unofficial evangelization outside official church buildings.⁵ There are apparently about a thousand house churches in Moscow, so this law would certainly hurt Christianity in Russia. Those who break the law face fines. If this were to happen in America, that doesn't mean we should stop worshiping Jesus and telling others about him. Even if those actions were illegal, we would keep doing them in obedience to Jesus. And we would have to trust that God would provide for us and take care of us, no matter what we face.

I pray that we all would get far more serious about evangelism and about our church while we still have the freedom to take advantage of the liberties that God has given to us. God has provided; will we use his provisions?

And, again, apart from evangelism, we trust that God would provide for all our needs. We may not know how we'll get through difficult situations, but we trust and we pray and we

⁵ Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Russia's Ban on Evangelism Is Now in Effect," *Christianity Today*, July 21, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/july/russia-ban-evangelism-effect.html> (accessed July 24, 2016).

obey Jesus. We do this because we trust that God has taken care of our greatest problem and that he will give us what we need, perhaps in the most surprising ways.

Our place, God's promise, and God's provision are important. So is our perseverance. It is obvious that Paul persevered. He didn't give up, even when things were difficult. Even when he left Corinth, he kept moving forward. Let's read the rest of today's passage. Here are verses 18-23:

¹⁸ After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. ¹⁹ And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

²⁰ When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. ²¹ But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus.

²² When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. ²³ After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

Paul leaves Corinth with Aquila and Priscilla, but not before getting his hair cut. We're not told specifics about the vow he took, but it seems that after Jesus appeared to Paul, Paul made a vow to God out of thanks to him. It must have involved not cutting his hair until he left the city.

Whatever the vow was, Paul leaves Corinth with Aquila and Priscilla and he preaches some more in the synagogue there. As always, he reasons with his fellow Jews. Paul wanted to get back to Antioch and Jerusalem, so he doesn't stay long, though he does return to that city later. We'll learn more about what Paul does in Ephesus next week.

Then Paul sails to Caesarea and goes to Jerusalem—that's what Luke means when he says, "he went up and greeted the church"—and then to Antioch. These were very important cities in the early years of Christianity. And after visiting his fellow Christians in those cities, he goes on foot back to the churches he had planted in Galatia and Phrygia, the churches he planted in chapters 13 and 14. Paul knew that the Christian life is more than just "getting saved." He knew that Christian converts had to be taught. They had to be strengthened in their faith. And Paul went out of his way to go back to see them. If you look on a map in your Bible, you can see how much ground Paul covered, often on foot, in order to make these missionary journeys.

If we are going to be faithful evangelists, we need to persevere. We need to keep telling people about Jesus, even when we're discouraged, even when we are rejected. And that shouldn't surprise us, because the whole Christian life is all about perseverance.

Let us emulate Paul. Let us make the most of where God has placed us, and let us go to people who need to hear about Jesus. Let us trust God's promises and his provision as we do that. And let us persevere, no matter how hard things get.

As a final note, I want to mention this: American Christians are discouraged now. We see so many people in America who reject Jesus. Many people who claim to be Christians want nothing to do with what the Bible actually teaches. Many politicians seem increasingly opposed to historic, orthodox Christianity. True Christians are very much in the minority. We no longer have culture or the political establishment on our side. In fact, they may never really have been on our side completely. And in the midst of this, it's easy to be angry and to lose hope.

This past week, I finished reading a book that I've mentioned before: *Onward*, by Russell Moore. This book gave me more confidence, despite what is happening now. Toward the end of the book he says, "Pessimism is for losers."⁶ Then he goes on to write,

The opponents of the gospel often picture the onward advance of secularization and of moral "freedom" as the inevitable march of historical progress. Christian orthodoxy is on the "wrong side of history." They believe this, but, too often, so do we.⁷

His point is that when we are negative and angry and lack hope, we show that we really don't believe the gospel.

Then he writes these words:

If all we have to go on is what we see around us, then of course, we will become scared and outraged, and our public witness will turn into an ongoing temper tantrum, designed just to prove to our opponents, and to ourselves, that we are still here. And in so doing we would employ the rhetorical tricks of other insecure movements: sarcasm, vitriol, ridicule. But we are not the voice of the past, of the Bible Belt to a post-Christian culture of how good things used to be. We are the voice of the future, of the coming kingdom of God. The message of the kingdom isn't "You kids, get off our lawn." The message of the kingdom is, "Make way for the coming of the Lord."⁸

⁶ Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2015), 202.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸ *Ibid.*

. . . Jesus is marching onward, with us or without us, and if the gates of hell cannot hold him back, why on earth would he be panicked by Hollywood or Capitol hill? . . . The arc of history is long, but it bends toward Jesus.⁹

Do not be afraid, but go on speaking. If God is for us, who can be against us?

⁹ Ibid., 204.