

# ENCOURAGEMENT

*SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE*

By Steve Zeisler

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The Christian life is succinctly described in 2 Corinthians 5:7: “We walk by faith, not by sight.” As we make our way through life, we trust in what is unseen rather than measuring our lives, determining our worth, and making our choices based on circumstances we can observe and predict. Now, most of us would prefer to walk by sight! It would be nice if clear directions were given, doors opened at just the right moment, and words of encouragement were offered when we needed them. It can be hard to trust an unseen God.

But if God didn’t make himself obscure at times, we would never learn to have faith. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as “the conviction of things not seen.” It is required that God be hidden at times, that his purposes be unclear, and that we trust him nonetheless, in order for us to become men and women of faith.

The text we’ll consider in this message, Acts 18, is going to have a lot of faith-producing hiddenness of God at first, and then we’ll see the ways God acts to encourage his servants. We are in a series of studies in the book of Acts, and we have come to the end of what is called the second missionary journey of Paul. The city of Corinth, which he is about to enter, is effectively the last stop on the journey. Acts 18:1-4:

**After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers. And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.**

The first sentence is very understated: “He left Athens and went to Corinth.” But piecing together the evidence from Paul’s own writings and the history that leads up to this, we must picture Paul as discouraged at this time. To be sure, he didn’t waver in his certainty of the love of Christ for him. He was consistently able to offer the gospel to other people. He had experienced miracles in his own life. But hurtful rejection had accumulated and weighed on him as he traveled from Athens to Corinth.

We know that he had left four successive cities under duress—beaten, dismissed, harassed, and ridiculed. He was almost certainly alone. You may remember that when he was forced to leave Berea and went on to Athens, he left word for Timothy and Silas to join him as soon as possible. But they never came. First Thessalonians 3:1-2 comments on correspondence between Paul and his friends. Evidently Paul had realized that there were problems in Thessalonica, and perhaps in Philippi. So instead of having Timothy join him, he sent him back to Thessalonica to care for the church there. Silas may well have gone back to Philippi. So Paul began and ended his time in Athens by himself, and now he was moving on to the next place.

Finally, he was almost certainly broke at this point. We know that because when he got to Corinth, he departed from his characteristic pattern. Upon entering a new city, in all of the reporting up to this point, we are told that immediately he began to do ministry. He and his companions went out to the riverside where they supposed there would be a place of prayer, or they went into a synagogue, and began to teach. But when Paul entered Corinth, the first thing he did was get a job and find a place to stay. We don’t know all of the patterns of funding of missionaries in the first century. Certainly churches gave gifts to support those who did the work of the gospel, but at times the gifts were not forthcoming, or were delayed. We can wonder whether Paul even had enough money to feed himself. What sort of shelter could he find as he walked the fifty-plus miles from Athens to Corinth? How many days would it have taken him? We ought to imagine him walking slowly, with his shoulders stooped, discouraged at heart, lonely, and broke as he entered Corinth.

The last thing to consider is what Paul was anticipating he would find in the city of Corinth. It was a daunting place to go if you had a concern for righteousness. It was the most morally depraved and unpredictable of the cities of its day. It had a reputation throughout the Roman Empire for loose living. If one wanted to criticize someone as being out of control sexually and generally debauched, one would call him or her “Corinthian.” In the popular dramas of the first century, if a Corinthian character showed up, he was inevitably drunk. Corinth was a trading city where big deals could be done, fortunes could be made and lost. It was a place of risks and rewards and shady characters to beware of, a place brimming with pride.

Taking all of these things together—Paul’s rejection in city after city, his loneliness, his poverty, and the concern he would have felt about the place he was now going—we know he was discouraged. He tells us so in the first letter to the Corinthians: “And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.” (1 Corinthians 2:1-3.) But he went to Corinth anyway. He didn’t quit, hoping someone else would do it. He didn’t give up his calling. He lived out his own (later) description of the Christian life: he walked by faith, not by sight. He went into Corinth without any assurance ahead of time of how God would meet his needs, only the assurance that he would do so.

Let’s continue with the story. Verse 5:

**But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.**

Luke doesn’t mention it, but we know from Paul’s letters that when Silas and Timothy came, they brought some money with them that they had collected in Thessalonica and probably in Philippi as well. So Paul, who had had a job for some weeks or months, was able to give it up and teach full time. Verses 6-17:

**But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.” And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.**

**But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, saying, “This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.” But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters.” And he drove them away from the judgment seat. And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things.**

This reference to Gallio’s unconcern sounds as if he were harsh and cold. But it is clear from other references to Gallio in Roman history that he was a very good man. He was generous, kindhearted, and thoughtful. Probably what Luke meant was that he was fair-minded, that he didn’t take sides easily, do deals, or pervert justice. He was a good, honorable judge who didn’t have an axe to grind.

What can we learn here about the way God cares for his servants when they are discouraged?

The first thing we should observe is the role of the body of Christ. The Lord uses other believers to care for those who are discouraged. There are two pairs of folks who came to Paul's aid in this story. The first pair, Aquila and Priscilla, were new friends to him. The second pair were his old friends Silas and Timothy. The Lord showed up in the living presence of these people and extended care to Paul when he was discouraged.

Aquila and Priscilla are very interesting. This is the first time we meet them in the New Testament. Later they would go on to have a powerful ministry in Ephesus and Rome. They are referenced in a couple of the letters, especially the book of Romans, in which Paul praises them for their godliness, service to the Lord, and friendship to him. They were a wonderful example of a couple doing ministry together. For centuries Christian husbands and wives who wanted to serve the Lord together have taken inspiration from Aquila and Priscilla. They always traveled, taught, and opened their home together.

They are mysterious, however, in that a key piece of information about them is unknown. We know that they were Jews because they were run out of Rome when the Jews were forced to leave by the emperor Claudius. We are told that they were tentmakers by trade. We know they were Christians. But we don't know how they became Christians. It is not clear whether Paul led them to Christ shortly after meeting them or whether they were already believers when he met them. I believe they were already Christians when they left Rome. But either way, they were a powerful ministering presence from God in Paul's life.

Think about the gift of new friends. Perhaps sometime you went to a new city or a new school, or into a new ministry environment, and there you met someone for the first time and found your hearts knitted together. You found that they loved Christ as you did, and they had a wonderful way of expressing it. They had a great sense of humor that clicked with yours. There are some really good things about finding a new and beautiful friendship. New friends don't know your whole history. You don't have to account for all the failure and foolishness of your past. They don't know your old ruts, and in that friendship it is easier to get out of patterns that aren't healthy, because they have no expectation that you're stuck in them. New friends don't know your old dreams or your sorrows; you can dream new dreams with new people. It is a great gift from God to let us sometimes flower in a new relationship. That is what took place for Paul with Aquila and Priscilla.

It's important to observe that they lived and worked together. Aquila and Priscilla invited Paul into their home. As tentmakers they worked in the leather-working area of the city's commercial district. Aquila and Priscilla and Paul would be haggling over prices together, sharing tools, worrying about the cost of goatskins. They shared their Christian life in that setting, expressing Christ's love to the others in the business section of the city and supporting one another at work. Then they could go home together. If they were living in our time, perhaps they would rent a movie on the way home and make some popcorn. This wasn't Christian fellowship that took place only in Bible studies, prayer meetings, and other officially sanctioned religious environments. They shared a lot of their life together. It must have been a great gift to Paul to be taken into the home of Aquila and Priscilla. They were a wonderful couple who loved each other and loved him.

My call to you is to take your skills, opportunities, and strengths and offer them to the Lord in a setting that is not familiar, so that you are reaching out to folks you don't yet know. Expect new insights into the ways of God. Often we have to push ourselves to get out of the circles we run in all the time, but it is worth it to see what the Lord will do if we make that choice.

Paul's old friends also played a critical role at this point. Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia with money that had been given by other friends in Philippi and Thessalonica. Old friends can speak of your value in a way that no one else can. The advantage of new friends is that they don't know your old problems, but the advantage of old friends is that they do. They know what you have been like a long time, and they care for you anyway. They can hold you accountable. They can see things about you that you might need to be reminded of, and they know you well enough to be able to do that. It is a great gift of God to have folks who have walked alongside you a long time and who can be part of building you up when you need it.

What else can we see here of how the Lord strengthens his servants? Events got turned on their heads in

Corinth. Paul was teaching in the synagogue, and as we would expect, the teaching in the synagogue led to both faith and resistance. But those who resisted him in this case did not act to reject Paul, because he rejected them first. Instead of waiting until they threw him out, he said to them, “I am done with you,” walked out, and shook out his garment in protest against them. Warnings are part of the gospel message. Repeated rejection of good news leads to hardness of heart.

The high point of this story is the vision in which the Lord appeared to Paul in person and said, “I am not going to let anybody hurt you. Keep on speaking. There are people who will respond to your message. Your ministry is going to flourish here. I myself am your companion.” In this vision the Lord was calming, strengthening, and building up a man who was shaky. It is interesting that when the Lord spoke to Paul, he didn’t say, “Do not be afraid” (some translations render it that way). He actually said, “Stop being afraid.” Evidently Paul was still dealing with some fear and uncertainty about himself.

Finally, when Crispus and Titius Justus both came to Christ, we see that the Lord was encouraging Paul with converts who were capable and gifted: a leader of the synagogue, and a man of means who had a house next door that could be used for ministry. Through these individuals and many others like them, the church was being strengthened.

I mentioned that Gallio was a good judge. This was another gift that God gave to Paul. He had been before bad judges in previous settings where mobs had been allowed to get out of control. In this case the Lord let him come before an honest judge.

Finally, even Sosthenes’ getting beaten up may have encouraged Paul. Crispus had been the leader of the synagogue. He converted to Christ, so they had to choose a new leader: Sosthenes. As the new leader, he presented the case against Paul before Gallio. The other members of the synagogue were angered that he did such a bad job, and beat him up. Now, Paul was used to being the one who got hammered after a public trial—it seemed to be his role in life—and it might have just brought a smile to his face to realize that he had escaped for once. But further, consider the opening verse of the first letter to the Corinthians: “Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, *and Sosthenes our brother*, to the church of God which is at Corinth....” (italics added). Sosthenes’ getting beaten up by the synagogue members had evidently led to *his* coming to faith in Christ.

Paul went where God had called him to go even though he didn’t know how any care for him would be offered. He went to Corinth with his shoulders slumped, broke, and alone. But he didn’t fail to go. And once he arrived in the city, he realized that the Lord was there ahead of him and had a home for him to stay in, people to care for him, and a variety of other encouragements. The way we grow in faith is to trust God when he is not evident, when we don’t know the answers ahead of time, when we are going into circumstances from which we can’t see how any good can come.

Importantly, in the city of Corinth the training of the next generation was at the center of what Paul was called to do. He went next-door to the synagogue, opened a ministry school in the home of Titius Justus, and for eighteen months taught day after day. As people were converted to Christ, new leadership began to emerge whom he taught, encouraged, and believed in. One of the reasons we know that is because there are several names given of those having a role in Corinth, which we don’t see in previous settings. Out of the three churches that were established in Macedonia—Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea—only two people are mentioned: Lydia and Jason. There were a great many other folks there, but they were not mentioned by name. In Corinth, we read the names of Aquila and Priscilla, Crispus, Titius Justus, Sosthenes, and even Gallio. These were the folks who were stepping through the open doors, the next in line to lead the believing community. This long stay in Corinth allowed for additional folks to begin to go out and use the skills and the instruction they had been given to pass the gospel on to other people.

Paul realized that he couldn’t go everywhere and be everything, and even his team couldn’t respond to every opportunity. They had to give away the ministry, “equip the saints for the work of service” (Ephesians 4:12).

That is clearly evident here, and I think this encouraged Paul deeply. He realized that he could give away what he had been given, that God would be faithful to use other people in the ministry.

We walk by faith, not by sight. We gain faith by trusting God when we can't see, by moving forward even when it is difficult, by assuming he will be there even though there is no measurable evidence that he is there now. The following words are from a letter written by Paul to the Corinthian church some time later, about being sure of things that are invisible:

“Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18.)

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