

# A UNITED FRONT

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION  
OF THE CHURCH.**



Catalog No. 20170312  
Acts 18:1-22  
24th Message  
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March 12, 2017

*Acts 18:1-22*

## Ganged Up On

There are five of us in my family of origin: mom, dad, and my brothers Brock and Brandon. For me, daily life with two older brothers was not very rosy. When people ask me what it was like growing up with two big brothers, I've been known to use words like, misery, oppression, dismal, and purgatory. I exaggerate a bit because that's my way, but it sure wasn't a picnic.

Having two older brothers means that from birth you are set up to fail. I was outnumbered, the physical underdog, and the easy target. When I look back on my childhood with Brock and Brandon, of course there are some happy memories, but more than anything I remember the constant teasing and the complete lack of personal space.

Before the advent of the minivan, little sisters had to sit in the middle half-seat in the back of a sedan, which means I got pinched and flicked from both sides. I never enjoyed playing games with my brothers. They were faster, more coordinated, and stronger, which meant I was usually "it," or quickly "out."

I think my brothers called me Dork more than they ever called me Corrie. In fact, nicknames were kind of their specialty. When perms were the rage in the late 80s, I followed the trend—perhaps not my best move. With curls added to my thick hair, I often ended up with quite the fro. My brothers started calling me "temple head" and "mushroom head" because of the dramatic silhouettes my hair made.

So what's a girl to do when two big meanies gang up on her? I couldn't persuade my brothers to be nice to me. I couldn't overpower them. I couldn't escape them. So I fell back on the only tools left to me—my acting skills. If the boys were bugging me and I wanted it to end, I would turn on the drama—and sometimes the tears—to get my parents' attention. My parents were my only backup against my brothers.

It's by the grace of God that I survived my childhood. But it wasn't easy. Even though it was just two young boys against me, it felt like the world was against me. I remember praying and begging God to bring me a sister or two to even the odds.

Have you ever been the one ganged up on, whether in childhood or as an adult? What did that feel like for you? How did you deal with your vulnerability? Did you take the first escape hatch you could find; look for backup; or did you come up with a battle plan and go on the offensive?

Today we'll see the Apostle Paul face significant opposition in his work for the Gospel. As he testifies about Jesus, the Jews get riled up and make what Luke calls "a united attack" against Paul. His situation will raise this big question for us: how should disciples of Jesus respond to opposition? We'll see that it's both Paul's wisdom in evangelism and his backup that enables him to continue serving God in a hostile environment.

## Paul in Corinth

Acts 17 ended with a mixed response to the Gospel in Athens—some people mocked Paul, but others believed in Jesus. As we begin Acts 18, Paul leaves Athens to go to Corinth, but it doesn't say why he makes this move.

We are somewhat familiar with Corinth because Paul wrote his two longest letters to the church there. Paul is now in one of the most significant cities in the Roman Empire. Located on an isthmus at the east-west center of the Mediterranean Sea, Corinth was a bustling port city with an estimated population larger than 200,000. The city was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. Every two years, Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, an Olympic-like sport and music competition that drew thousands of visitors from all over the empire.

As an epicenter for trade, government, and culture, Corinth was known for its prosperity and licentiousness. One scholar has even called it, "the Las Vegas of its time." (Darrell Bock, p 577) <sup>1</sup> This is Paul's new location for ministry, so let's pick up the story in Acts 18:1 and read through verse 6.

## Acts 18:1-6:

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup> 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, <sup>3</sup> and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. <sup>4</sup> Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

<sup>5</sup> When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. <sup>6</sup> 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.”

There are a few things going on in the background that I’ll explain quickly. Verse 2 mentions that Aquila, a Jew, is in Corinth because Claudius made all the Jews leave Rome. Claudius was the Roman Emperor, and in the year 49, he issued a decree expelling the Jews from Rome. There’s a bit of debate about the language in his decree, but it seems to suggest that the Jews in Rome were arguing amongst themselves whether Jesus was the Messiah. <sup>2</sup> Their debate grew so heated that it led to riots, so Claudius forced all of them out.

Aquila and his wife Priscilla left Rome and settled in Corinth. Luke calls them tentmakers, which probably meant that they were leatherworkers who used leather hides to make temporary, movable dwellings, or tents. Tentmaking was likely a lucrative business in Corinth because of the Isthmian Games. Think of the thousands of visitors who would need temporary shelters for the games!

Paul settles into Corinth in a new way. He’s been all over the empire on these two missionary journeys, but he’s never stayed in one place very long. In Corinth, Paul works at his trade during the week and then goes to the synagogue every Sabbath. Only there do we see him doing his usual thing. He “reasons” with the Jews, testifying about Jesus, attempting to persuade his fellow Jews that the Christ, or Messiah, is Jesus. I love the way Luke describes Paul engaged in his mission. Verse 5 says he is “occupied with the word”, the language which suggests absorption or complete devotion to the Gospel.

## Paul Faces Opposition

Despite his devoted efforts, Paul and his message are not received well. The Jews “opposed and reviled him.” The word revile comes from the Greek verb to blaspheme. Picture the Jews being harsh, speaking evil things to and about Paul. And then we see Paul’s curious response—he shakes out his garments, declares his innocence, and says he will now go to the Gentiles. What in the world is Paul doing with his clothes? What is this curse-like phrase he says to the Jews?

The Jews were a very demonstrative people. They often used physical actions to express strong emotions. In extreme grief, they were known to tear their clothes and put ashes or dirt in their hair. But the Jews also did things like this symbolically as they spoke solemn intentions or vows. Paul’s actions would have been easily understood by his Jewish audience.

Paul’s actions here should also remind us of Jesus sending out 72 disciples to preach and heal. He told them, “...But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, <sup>11</sup> ‘Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you.’” (Luke 10:10-11). <sup>3</sup> By word and action, Paul is proclaiming that he is innocent of any wrongdoing and that he is finished with these Jews. Now he will take the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles.

## Paul’s Response to Opposition

In these moments, Paul has an important lesson for disciples throughout the ages. No one had more devotion to the Gospel or more evangelical fervor than Paul, but notice that he also had the wisdom to know when to walk away. Paul reached a point when he knew that no amount of logic or persuasion was going to change these Jews’ minds. They rejected his message, so he has the good sense to move on. And yet this is such a contrast to some of the disciples of Jesus that I have known.

Sometimes we Christians are too dogged or persistent in our mission for the Gospel. We have a friend who doesn’t know Jesus, and out of love, we want to share the Good News with them. That’s great! But we begin to veer off course when we don’t see that the person is closed to the Gospel. Sometimes we push too hard. Seeing people stubbornly refuse to believe in Jesus makes some of us turn up our stubborn. They need Jesus, we tell ourselves. We can’t give up. And we push and pester until the name Jesus is the last thing our friend wants to hear.

How many of you know disciples who have accidentally pushed away their loved ones thinking that a never-ending stream of Jesus-talk is best way to spread the Gospel? Maybe you are like this. Don't get me wrong, fervor for the Gospel is good, but unchecked fervor can burn.

We need to follow Paul's example in Acts 18. Disciples need to discern when our evangelism efforts aren't going well. We need to know when to step back and change our plans. Let me make this principle simple for you—don't waste your breath.

## Don't Waste Your Breath

If the person you're witnessing to shows no signs of interest—they don't seem to be genuinely listening, they don't engage your conversation or ask questions—then it's time for a new approach. Maybe step away for a while to let things sink in and then gently try again later with a different approach. But if your evangelism is met with fierce opposition like the Jews in Corinth, don't waste your breath. Walk away.

Somewhere nearby there is the fertile soil of a heart ready to receive the Gospel. Seek people who are open and ready to listen. There's no need to get stuck in a battle with a hardened heart; there's no medal for that in heaven! It doesn't make you a more respectable Christian. Instead, you'll find only frustration and discouragement. Don't waste your breath. The Gospel suffers when its proclaimers are stubborn and insensitive.

Paul has been journeying for the Gospel for years now. He's learned what works and what doesn't. One thing we've noticed in this series in Acts is that Paul is always attentive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. So in Corinth we see him disengage with the Jews and turn to the Gentiles.

## The Gospel Flourishes

Acts 18:7-11:

**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.**

Paul quickly finds fertile soil, hearts that are receptive to the Gospel, and he finds them close by. Paul continues his mission work right next to the synagogue where he was rejected. That's pretty provocative. If I were facing such opposition, I'd go to the opposite end of the city, where I'd feel safe and could start from scratch. But not Paul! He stays close and experiences a rich harvest of souls. Many are baptized. Entire households come to faith in Jesus, even a synagogue leader.

All of this happens within earshot of the synagogue. The text doesn't say this, but I imagine that the opposition didn't suddenly disappear. I bet that Paul's boldness in preaching next door kept the Jews stirred up. Maybe they continued to harass him. Maybe they did some counter-evangelism on the streets. Maybe the remaining synagogue leaders even spoke out against Paul during their worship gatherings, warning their congregation to stay on alert.

How could Paul keep doing his ministry with the opposition next door? The text doesn't explicitly say, but the more I sit with this passage, the more I see clues in the way Luke tells the story. He doesn't insert any commentary; he just records events. But look at all the names he records in this chapter, all the people Paul has by his side.

Pulling from verses 1-11, there are Aquila and Priscilla, with whom Paul shares Roman citizenship, his Jewish heritage, and his trade. Then Silas and Timothy show up in Corinth. They've traveled with Paul for months, been trained by him, and have become his co-workers in the Gospel. Now add to these numbers the new converts to Christianity—Titius Justus, Crispus and his household, and the "many other Corinthians" who came to faith.

I believe Paul carried on in the face of opposition because he wasn't alone. It's true what they say—there's strength in numbers. Yes, the Jews next door hated Paul and his message, but Paul was surrounded by his many brothers and sisters in Christ. And not only that, Paul also had God on his side. What a gift for Paul—to have God speak to him and say, "I am with you. No one will harm you. I have many in this city who are my people."

Despite the slander and opposition of the Jews, Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months—his longest stop in all of his missionary journeys. He stayed engaged in his mission because he was surrounded and supported by his people and his God.

## Camraderie Defeats Opposition

So here's the lesson for us when we face opposition as disciples—keep your comrades close. Comrade is a word for people who share the same mindset. Comrades go on missions together. They draw strength from each other. I'm convinced that we disciples need each other, that we are essential to each other's spiritual well-being and our effectiveness in ministry.

Silicon Valley is somewhat like Corinth—a hub of culture-making things. We've got cutting-edge science and technology, excellent higher education, a diversity of ethnicities, and lots of intelligent people sharing ideas. But like Corinth, Silicon Valley is not particularly welcoming to Christianity.

It's not hip to be sold out for Jesus around here. It's more acceptable to keep quiet about your beliefs. And it seems easiest to accept all religions rather than devoting yourself to just one. Maybe you've experienced hostility or opposition to your faith in your family, your neighborhood, or your workplace. That is difficult and discouraging. The open opposition can make us want to hide our faith, and that's why we need each other. We need our comrades.

It's no secret that soldiers deployed to war zones depend on each other. They protect each other's backs from enemy forces. Facing life-and-death situations bonds soldiers in a unique way. It's this bond, this camaraderie that enables them to walk into extreme danger and complete their mission. Military families also function as a close-knit tribe. They find solace and strength in each other in ways they can't from civilian friends, because civilians don't quite understand their unique lifestyle. Soldiers and military families need each other to survive. Christians need each other the same way.

Over the years I've met many Christians who've said they don't need the church. There are so many Christians out there going it alone. They don't attend church much, or at all. They don't have much if any Christian community. That always makes me sad and concerned for them. Who will encourage them to grow in their faith? Who is praying with and for them? Who do they go to when they are confused or struggling with

their faith? And when they face significant opposition, who is their back up? Of course, we can always draw significant strength from God's presence, but it seems to me that camaraderie with other Christians is a major ingredient in perseverance.

We can keep serving Jesus in our own hostile environments because we are not alone. God is with you. I am with you. The people sitting next to you—they should be with you too. So I challenge you today to dig into this community. Invest in relationships with these believers until you know them as brothers and sisters. As God was with and for Paul, he is with and for us. Now let us be with and for each other. Keep your comrades close.

Again, thankfully Paul had many comrades in Corinth because the threat against him was not over.

## A United Attack

**Acts 18:12-18:**

**While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. 13 “This man,” they charged, “is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.”**

**14 Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, “If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. 15 But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.” 16 So he drove them off. 17 Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.**

**18 Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cencreae because of a vow he had taken.**

The Jews made a “united attack” on Paul by ratting him out to the Roman proconsul, or governor. Gallio was the ultimate legal authority in the province. As such, he had the power to imprison or even execute Paul if found guilty. <sup>4</sup>Not only that, but several historical documents make it clear that Gallio was no friend of the Jews. Some historians have even categorized him as openly anti-Semitic.

So now Paul's Jewish enemies have put him in the most vulnerable situation possible. If they can persuade Gallio that Paul is teaching a new faith, one different from Judaism and as such one unapproved by the Roman government, then Paul's ministry may be finished for good. But I love the twist in the story. Just as Paul's enemies were preparing to revel in their success, something unexpected happens. Gallio refuses to judge Paul because in his mind this is clearly a Jewish matter. He doesn't need to get involved.

## God Intercedes for the Vulnerable

By far, my favorite part of the story is verse 14 where it says that Paul is "about to open his mouth," but before he can even defend himself, Gallio throws the matter out of court. This situation illustrates another critical reminder for disciples as they face opposition to their faith—expect God to intercede.

Luke doesn't explicitly say that this twist was God at work, but I think it's a fair interpretation. The Spirit of God often works behind the scenes, in-between the lines, and quietly in human hearts, even in hearts that don't call Jesus, Lord. I think Gallio's refusal to judge Paul is absolutely the Spirit at work. If Gallio was truly an anti-Semite, here was the perfect opportunity to bring down the hammer on an enemy. But he doesn't. He lets Paul go and kicks Paul's accusers out of court.

Paul goes free, unharmed. Surely God interceded for him so his ministry for the Gospel could continue. But not everyone is as safe. Sosthenes, a ruler of the synagogue, is seized and beaten. Is he a Christian sympathizer? We don't know, but he seems to get the punishment that the Jews hoped for Paul. That day in Corinth could have gone very differently. It could have ended in imprisonment, punishment, or even death for Paul. But God interceded, and Paul was released to continue his ministry, which he does for "many days longer."

We've seen this pattern of opposition and intercession throughout the book of Acts. It seems like every other week we've read about a disciple facing opposition. We've read about slander and rejection, beatings and stonings, imprisonment and legal trials. But we've also seen the disciples find fertile soil for the Gospel. The good news has been powerfully preached in hostile environments and many people have become followers of Jesus. Angels freed Peter and Paul from prison on multiple occasions. God constantly interceded for his people because he loved them and he had more good work for them to do.

As surely as God interceded for Paul in the 1st century, God intercedes for disciples today. When we face opposition, we should expect God to move, because that's God's way.

Corrie Ten Boom was a plain and ordinary woman who lived during World War II. Corrie and her family were devoted disciples of Jesus. During the war their faith led them to protect their Jewish friends and neighbors as then Nazis took over Holland. For years the Ten Booms hid people in their home and helped them escape through Europe's version of the underground railroad.

Corrie and her family eventually were caught and sent to prison. Most of them were released, but Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to a concentration camp called Ravensbrück. There they were forced into hard labor. They were made to strip naked and stand outside for hours in winter. They were verbally abused and harassed by the guards. Despite such harsh opposition, Corrie and Betsie continued to spread the Good News about Jesus because they saw God intercede for them in so many ways.

Because a guard wasn't paying attention, Corrie was able to smuggle her Bible and a bottle of vitamin drops into the camp. That bottle might supply one or two people for a month, but the sisters shared it among the 25 women in their bunkhouse, and it lasted much longer than it should have. The sisters hosted a Bible study in their bunkhouse, and the only reason the guards never came in to stop them was because their bunks were infested with fleas. Corrie was released from the camp because of a clerical error. A guard mistakenly marked her paperwork 'release' and a week after she was released all of the women in her age group were sent to the gas chamber.

Corrie emerged from the concentration camp physically weak, but strengthened in her faith because she had seen God intercede for her in so many ways. Like the Apostle Paul, Corrie endured great opposition but went on to travel around the world, sharing her stories, and telling people about the great love of God.<sup>5</sup>

Today we saw Paul face fierce opposition, but he endured, and the Gospel thrived. This is what we can learn from Acts 18. When we disciples face opposition we shouldn't waste our breath preaching at hardened hearts. We should keep our comrades close so we can persevere. And we should expect God to intercede for us.

I pray that you find these things to be encouraging, helpful, and true when you face opposition. May God bless you with wisdom, friends, and faith.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bock, Darrell L., *Acts. The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (BECNT)*. Baker Academic. 2007  
October 1.

<sup>2</sup> For more read, Suetonius' account in *Life of Claudius 25.4*

<sup>3</sup> See also Matthew 10:13-15; Mark 6:10-12; Acts 13:51; Nehemiah 5:1-13.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Gallio comes from a very famous family. His father was the orator Seneca the Elder. His brother was the Stoic philosopher and writer Seneca the Younger, whose surviving writings mention Gallio.

<sup>5</sup> To hear this inspiring story, read *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom.