



Encouragement for the Weary

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

“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. 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. 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” (Acts 18:1-17).

In Acts 18 the Apostle Paul is in the middle of his second missionary journey. He arrives in the great city of Corinth and I believe when he got there Paul was discouraged. That fact doesn’t jump off the page, but it’s true.

We all deal with discouragement in life. No one

escapes. Not too long ago, the Hayden Planetarium in New York City issued an invitation to all those interested in applying to be a part of the crew on the first journey to another planet. 18,000 people applied. They gave the applications to a panel of psychologists, who examined them and came to the conclusion that in the vast majority of cases, those who applied did so because they were discouraged with their lives here and hoped they could find a new life somewhere else.

Sometimes we pretend that being a follower of Christ keeps us from discouragement, but it’s not so. God’s servants are not immune to discouragement. Elijah got so discouraged he asked God to take his life. In one of his psalms, David was so discouraged he asked God, “Why have you forgotten me?” Even when I think of the Christmas story I can’t help but think of how discouraged Joseph must have felt. He starts out engaged to this young woman. Like all grooms, he must have been excited to get married and enjoy his beautiful new bride. But then she drops this bomb and tells him she’s pregnant—something about the Holy Spirit doing it! Amidst rumors and gossip, he marries her out of pure obedience to God. It’s not quite the wedding he dreamed of! Nine months later, as she’s about to give birth, some lame politician decides it’s time for a census. He drags Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem where he can’t even find a room for her to sleep in. And then some time after the baby was born they’re forced to move to the godforsaken land of Egypt because Herod is on a murderous rampage. When they finally move back to Nazareth there were those silent years when any expectation that Jesus had was special were buried beneath the day in and day out grind of life. Joseph must have felt awfully discouraged at times.

Why do I believe the Apostle Paul was so discouraged when he came to Corinth? If you look at what had happened in the days leading up to his arrival there, you’ll see why.

I. God’s servants can become discouraged.

A. Paul encountered much opposition: First of all, Paul had had a rough time on this journey. In Philippi he was flogged—a particularly cruel form of Roman punishment. And then he was thrown into prison; his feet fastened in stocks. From there he went to Thessalonica where he was run out of town and one his friends had to actually post a bond, ensuring that Paul would never return. Then he went to Berea and things were going so well there...until the Jewish leaders from Thessalonica tracked him down and set the city in an uproar. Then he had to flee for his life on a ship to Athens. We read these things and we tend to think, “Well, this is the Apostle Paul. He was a

man of faith. He never wavered. He knew things would be tough." But I'm not so sure. I think there were times when Paul thought, "Who needs this? I was doing just fine back in Tarsus. I was serving the Lord, but I wasn't beaten and abused, hounded from city to city, treated like scum. I can do without this."

B. Paul saw meager results from his ministry: You would think that with so many people coming to Christ Paul could endure it. But he might have been discouraged about that as well. Think about what happened in Athens. He has this golden opportunity to speak at Mars Hill in front of some of the greatest minds the world has ever known. He crafts and delivers an extraordinary message tailored just for them. But the results were meager. Most of the listeners ridiculed his belief in the resurrection. Some were more polite and said maybe they would have him back some time to talk some more. Only a few believed. He left Athens and we read nothing of a church being formed there. What a disappointment! How discouraging!

C. Paul was alone: To make matters worse, when Paul got to Corinth he was alone. Earlier on this trip he enjoyed the companionship of Luke, Silas and Timothy. But Luke had been left in Philippi. Silas and Timothy stayed back in Berea. It was the right thing to do. The new believers in those places needed teaching and shepherding. But Paul paid a price. It's hard to be alone, especially when times are tough. Mother Theresa once said, "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer. It's the feeling of being uncared for, unwanted; of being deserted and alone." Paul must have felt that. This had to add to his discouragement.

D. Paul was out of money: And then just to add one more thing to the list, Paul was broke. When he started out on his journey he had no doubt been given money from his sending church at Antioch. I'm sure that on the way other churches chipped in to help as well. But it appears that when he arrived in Corinth he lacked funds because he had to find work. Paul was a tentmaker. He had learned this skill because Jewish law required that young rabbinic students be taught a trade. So when he got to Corinth this is what he did. He didn't complain about it. He did this in part because he didn't want to be a burden to anyone. But, still, part of it was by necessity. If you've ever been through a time where you feel like you're working your tail off but still can't make ends meet you know how discouraging that can be.

E. Paul was afraid: Put all of this together and you can understand why Paul wrote to the Corinthians years later and when he reflected on his arrival in Corinth he said, "**I was with you in weakness and fear and in much trembling**" (1Cor.2:3). I don't blame him! He had every reason to feel weak, fearful and discouraged.

F. God's servants can become discouraged: I wonder if you ever feel like that? I certainly have. Maybe certain personalities are more prone to it but no one is immune to it. I find that there are three things that can bury me in discouragement. First, a battle long fought but never won. Many of us are fighting battles like that. It might be a battle for your own marriage. It might be a battle to stay clean from some addiction. It might be to get out of debt. It's

not always the battle itself, but the fact that it goes on and on. Like a marathon runner in the twentieth mile, we can't imagine running six more.

Another thing that causes discouragement is unmet expectations. Sometimes events long looked forward to, like Christmas, let us down. Sometimes people let us down. Sometimes we even feel that God lets us down. This is particularly true as it relates to prayer. Larry Crabb writes, "When I was 10, I first heard Matthew 21:22, where Jesus, who never lies, said, 'If you believe, you'll receive whatever you ask for in prayer.' It was the 'whatever' model of prayer—believe, ask for whatever you want, and it's yours. I remember running outside, standing on our driveway, closing my eyes real tight, and praying: God, I want to fly like Superman. And I believe you can do it. So I'll jump, and you take it from there. I jumped four times—and each time landed half a second later and half a foot farther down the driveway. I had believed and I had asked, just like Jesus said. But I didn't receive. Thus began my 50-year journey of confusion about prayer." There have been times I've felt like that. When events or people or God lets us down, we get discouraged.

Finally, personal failure causes discouragement. When we stumble, when we sin, when we make a stupid decision that has consequences for not only us but people we love, we get discouraged. I made a financial decision a few years back that cost us a good chunk of our savings. I think about it almost every day and every time I do I beat myself up over it. That's discouraging!

The question is, how do we survive discouragement? How do we get to the other side of it? I believe our God is a God of encouragement. I believe he loves to encourage his weary servants with fresh strength. As a matter of fact, I would say that there is no end to the ways God reaches out to encourage his servants. I believe that because I see here in Acts 18 how God encouraged Paul while he was in Corinth.

II. God encourages his servants in a number of ways.

A. God gave Paul two new friends to work with: First of all, God gave Paul two new friends to work with. Their names were Aquila and Priscilla. Like Paul, they were newcomers to Corinth, having been forced out of Rome. Like Paul, they were tentmakers and followers of Jesus. Like Paul, they move around a lot; we know that churches met in their home in both Ephesus and Rome and probably here in Corinth as well. They'll become some of Paul's best friends and trusted coworkers. It must have been encouraging for Paul, separated from Timothy, Luke and Silas, to meet this couple of kindred spirit. I've found that when I am most discouraged God has a way of sending someone into my life, often times someone I wouldn't have expected, who brings encouragement. This also reminds us that one of the worst things we can do in our seasons of discouragement is to isolate ourselves from others. It's counterintuitive but we have to welcome people into our lives when we're down.

B. God sent Silas and Timothy with good news and good gifts: The second thing God did was he encouraged Paul through the arrival of Silas and Timothy. I'm sure it was just great to see them but they also brought two things with them that would have been very encouraging to Paul. They

brought with some good gifts and some good news. Luke says in v.5 that when Timothy and Silas arrived Paul was able to devote himself completely to the word. Why was that? That was because they brought with them a gift from Macedonia and the Philippian church. In 2 Cor. 11:9 he writes, **“for when the brethren came from Macedonia, they fully supplied my need.”** And to the Philippians he wrote a thank you note, saying, **“And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone”** (Phil. 4:15). Ever get a check in the mail you didn't expect? That's encouraging. That lifts your spirit. That's what Paul felt.

But they didn't just bring good gifts, they also brought good news. Paul had been worried sick about the Thessalonians. From Corinth he wrote to them and said, **“But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith.”** (1 Thess. 4:6-7). Any parent knows what it is to worry about a son or daughter and what a relief it is to hear good news about them. Paul felt this relief.

C. God blessed the ministry in Corinth: The third thing God did to encourage Paul was he blessed his ministry in Corinth. Although things didn't go well in the synagogue, things went quite well right next door. A man named Titius Justus, who lived next door to the synagogue took Paul in. Presumably he became a believer. And then Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with his whole household. Then it says that **“many of the Corinthians were believing and being baptized.”** It had been a slow start but now the Lord was on the move and many were coming to faith. That must have encouraged Paul.

D. God spoke to Paul: But even with all of that, I think Paul was still struggling. In almost every city Paul had been in, things would go well for awhile and then things would kind of fall apart. I think Paul was waiting for the **“other shoe to drop.”** Why do I think that? Because of what happened next. Verse 9 says the Lord showed up to Paul in the night by means of a vision. This didn't happen every night for Paul. This was the kind of thing that happens once or twice in a lifetime. I believe it was one of those watershed moments for Paul. The Lord spoke to him in a very personal way.

The first thing he said was, **“Do not be afraid...”** By the way, this is the same thing the angel Gabriel said to Joseph in a dream by night: **“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid...”** (Mt. 1:20). The way he puts this implies that Paul WAS afraid. A better way to translate this is, **“Stop being afraid!”** Despite the good things that had happened, Paul was still afraid. The one who stood up to a stoning; who sang songs of praise to God in prison at midnight; who fearlessly spoke in front of magistrates, was in danger of caving in to fear

Then the Lord said to Paul, **“go on speaking and do not be silent.”** Again, Paul must have considered calling it quits. He must have been tempted to stop. Maybe he wondered if there was some better method to use. Maybe he

should just try to win people by living a good life and being an example. Or maybe he should completely devote himself to writing. Or maybe he should just pray for people. But God says, **“No! None of those things will do, Paul. You need to keep speaking about me.”** Maybe this is why later on Paul would say, **“How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ”** (Rom. 10:14, 17). That's why, no matter how discouraged we are, we can never give up speaking the gospel.

Then the Lord gave him a promise, **“for I am with you.”** This is what Jesus said to the disciples as he sent them out, **“For I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”** In some ways this seems so basic. Of course God is with us. Like Paul doesn't know that! But when God says **“I am with you”** he means so much more than just **“I'm present.”** He means **“I'm present FOR YOU. I'm there FOR YOU.** All that I am is at YOUR disposal.” You see, that's what we're tempted to doubt in times of discouragement; not that he's there but that he's there for us.

Another promise for Paul, **“no man will attack you in order to harm you.”** This promise will be tested momentarily as he's brought before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia. It's interesting because this promise didn't seem to be in effect in other cities where he was stoned and left for dead. But here, the Lord says, things will be different. You won't be attacked. You won't be harmed. I think at that time in that city that's what Paul needed to hear. It's almost like the Lord knows how much we can handle, and in this case he says, **“I know you're tired of getting beat up Paul. I know you're tired of those lumpy mattresses in prison. Not to worry. That's not going to happen here.”**

Then the last thing he says is really the reason that he should stay. He says, **“for I have many people in this city.”** He's not just talking about the ones who have already believed. He's talking about the ones who have yet to believe, yet the Lord knows who they are. Isn't that great? I wonder if the Lord could say that about this city: **“I have many people in this city.”** I think he could say that. That's why we're here! Sometimes we want to leave this place. It's so expensive to live here. It's so ungodly. It's so fast-paced. But I wonder if God might say to us, **“Stick around because I have many people in this place.”**

And that's what Paul did. Verse 11 says Paul settled there for 18 months. That's a long time for a guy who usually gets run out of town in a week. And I believe the only reason he could do it was because the Lord had encouraged his heart.

F. God provided legal protection for the gospel: And the Lord kept his promise. That had to be encouraging for Paul, too. The Jews brought Paul before Gallio and charged him with teaching people to worship God in a way contrary to their law. Gallio was an important man who could do a lot of harm to Paul and to the gospel if he sided with the Jews, but he threw the case out. He says, **“This is a petty issue having to do with your own religion; it's not a legal or a criminal matter.”** This is important because the Jewish faith was seen as a legal religion within the Roman empire

and now Christianity is officially viewed as just a part of the Jewish faith. That would allow the gospel to spread without legal interference. This would hold true for the next decade as it was not until then this policy would be reversed. What an encouragement for Paul.

CONCLUSION

Isn't it amazing the variety of ways that God can encourage us? There is no end to the ways God reaches out to bring encouragement to his servants. So if you're discouraged, consider a few things.

First of all, you're not alone. What you're experiencing is common to God's people. Stop beating yourself up because you get discouraged. It's part of being weak and human.

Second, don't isolate. One of the chief ways God encourages you is through other people. You have to be willing to let those people encourage you. You have to be willing to receive the good gifts or the good news they offer.

Third, think twice before running away. Paul wanted to run away but God said to stay. When discouraged we often make rash decisions and think that by running from whatever the problem is we'll solve the problem. It rarely works.

Finally, listen to God. Let him speak to you. There is no substitute for hearing his voice in a very personal way. He does that as you seek his face; as you keep your nose in his word; as you work out your discouragement in his presence. He'll assure you, "I am with you. I am for you. All that I am is at your disposal."

The fact is, there is no end to the ways God reaches out to bring encouragement to his servants.