

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

Acts 18:1-22

In a children's story called *The Tale of Two Beasts*,¹ a little girl rescues a little beast in the woods that is stuck and crying for help in a tree. She catches the little beast and wraps it up in her scarf and proceeds to take it home and make it her pet. She makes a nice little home for it in a box and feeds it and takes it one walks and shows it off, until one day the beast escapes out the window, leaving the little girl puzzled. Then, the story is told from the beast's point of view. One day, he was hanging out in his favorite tree, just singing along with the birds when suddenly, a large beast ambushed him, tied him up and took him to her lair. Disgustingly, the beast washed him and shoved him in box, tried to feed him awful food and showed him off to other beasts just like her until one day he was able to escape her clutches.

Perspective matters, doesn't it? Especially when the going gets tough in our lives and we're going through some difficult or confusing and undesirable situation. How do we see it and how does God see it? That's sort of what we're going to talk about today as we pick up our study in Acts 18. Paul is in the city of Corinth near the end of a long, hard 2nd missionary journey and he needs a perspective other than his own to keep going.

I. **LONG STAY AT CORINTH. (VV. 1-17)**

After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 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, 3 and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers. 4 And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. 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.

So **Paul** moves on now from Athens to **Corinth** alone while **Silas** and **Timothy** remained at Berea for a while longer to help establish the church there. Corinth was located 40 miles west of Athens. It was the **capital** of the province of **Achaia**, the southern portion of Greece. Historians estimate the population in the 1st century around **200,000** so it was a significant city. Just to give you an idea of how big cities were in that day, Rome was 1.2 million, Alexandria in Egypt around 600,000, Ephesus 200-250,000, Jerusalem at 80,000, and Athens at 30,000.²

Corinth was located in a very unique location on this little neck of land, called an **isthmus**, connecting the Peloponnesian peninsula with the mainland of Greece. As you can imagine, this became a strategic place for commerce and travel and warfare going back and forth on land but also east and west on the sea, from the Ionian, or Adriatic Sea on the west, to the Aegean Sea on the east. Rather than sail the **200 miles** all the way around the treacherous Cape Malea, ships

would rather be carted over this **3.5-mile** strip of land. Several leaders and emperors, such as Nero, tried to dig a canal through this strip of land made of pure rock, unsuccessfully. It wasn't until the invention of dynamite that the canal was finished in 1893.



One of the greatest **archaeological** finds that support the Bible is an inscription near the Corinthian theatre which reads, "*Erastus paved this with his own money for the aedileship.*"³ In Romans 16:23, Paul mentions **Erastus**, who served as Corinth's city treasurer (the aedile). There is also a door lintel that reads, "*Synagogue of the Hebrews*" and some Jewish menorahs.⁴ I mention that because the archaeology is faith-affirming for us.



Corinth was also home to the **Isthmian Games**, much like the Olympics. They were held every other year with competitions in athletic events like boxing and discus and races, to equestrian and musical competitions. Just like today, people were obsessed with sports and competition. The city would swell with crowds from all over the world during games.

But there is another major characteristic Corinth was known for and that is its immorality. When you read the letter to the Corinthians, it's obvious the church struggled with **moral integrity and idol worship** and that's because the two were connected. Located on the **Acrocorinth**, the hill towering over this city, was a temple dedicated to the false god **Aphrodite**, the god of love. Remember how the famous love chapter of the Bible is in the book of Corinthians? There's a reason for that. Amidst all the perversion, Paul had to explain to them what true love is. The city was so perverse, due to this temple and the transient traffic, that to call someone a "Corinthian" or to "corinthianize" was a euphemism for immorality. This city made a sailor blush. Many have likened this city to the Las Vegas of the day. The city slogan was, "*Not everyone can afford a trip to Corinth,*" and the poet Horace called it a town where only the tough survive.

And that's a helpful connecting thought because by the time Paul arrives here, he's been through a tough journey. Remember, Paul is nearing the end of a long 2nd missionary journey. He's tired. He's alone. He's short on provisions. He's been beaten and persecuted, no doubt looking over his shoulders for the next attacker. In **1 Corinthians 2:3**, Paul says he was *with them in weakness and fear and much trembling*. There are several Scriptural clues that indicate Paul was weary, like this boxer in the games who is tired and dazed. He's exhausted but just like he says in **1 Corinthians 9:24-27**, he disciplines his body to keep going and keeps looking for eternal prize and focusing on the heavenward call. He had to push himself like an athlete to keep going.



Thankfully, Paul finds some friends who are of the same **tentmaking trade** as him—**Aquila and Priscilla**. This married couple, along with many other Jews, relocated here after being driven out of Rome through a decree from **Claudius** for causing riots in the city. The historian **Suetonius**

recorded this imperial edict mentioned, saying, “*since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.*” Many think Chrestus was probably a misspelling of Christus, with an “i” and a reference for Christ.⁵ Since Christus was a common name it’s hard to tell if it’s a reference to some Jewish activist or if it’s a reference to Jesus Christ, but the way Luke uses it here in correlation with an uprising of Jews in Corinth against Christ (as is the pattern where Paul goes) it suggests it was the common Jewish response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The same thing will happen in Corinth. Jews will riot over the gospel.

But in Corinth there seems to be a theme and that is God using **unforeseen, unexpected, undesirable circumstances (from our perspective)**. Think of Aquila and Priscilla who end up here as a result of **undesirable circumstances**. How hard it had to be on them to be kicked out of Rome and end up here of all places. Yet, in **God’s providence**, He uses it. He uses it for them to meet Paul and become **lifelong friends and ministry partners** of his (Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19).⁶ They are a great encouragement to Paul and model couple who give their home, their work, and their marriage to the Lord and the Lord uses them greatly. I want to note a quick principle here: **be an encouragement to someone going through something tough**. Encourage them. Pray for them. Help them with their needs. Open your home to them.

When the going gets tough, be/find a friend.

When things get tough, we need to be a friend and we need friends. Part of the reason we need godly friends is because they can speak truth into our lives and be a listening ear. When things get tough, we don’t always think right. We start to question God’s character and goodness and sink into the mire of self-pity. Godly friends can help lift us out of that.

But verse 5 tells us eventually **Silas** and **Timothy** come from Macedonia and Paul is then able to then **fully devote himself to the word** – teaching, preaching, and sharing the gospel. This is no doubt due in part to the refreshing **financial gift of the Philippians** who gave more than once to support Paul’s ministry (2 Cor. 11:9; Phil. 4:15). Paul had nothing against working hard but preferred to minister the gospel full time. While he was at Corinth, he would also write letters to the Thessalonians and continue to minister to the Jewish community, and many turn on him.

6 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.” 7 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. 8 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. 9 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; 10 for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.” 11 And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

So much of the Jewish community turns on Paul. They've heard the message and rejected it and so he **turns to the Gentiles** in Corinth. As a **prophetic, symbolic gesture he shakes out his garment** as if to say that as a "watchman" he has done his job to share the gospel and they are not responsible for not heeding his warning. Their blood be on their own heads. The idea goes back to **Ezekiel 3:17-21**. As God's witnesses, we can think of ourselves as true watchman, unlike the "Jehovah's Witnesses" and their Watchtower magazine that rejects Christ.

After turning from them, he doesn't go far from the synagogue. Actually, it's just **next door at the house of Titius Justus** and many people are getting saved as the Lord works there and they had to be awkward for the synagogue. Even **Crispus**, the leader of the synagogue and his family are saved. So like a broken record in Acts, the point is made over and over that you cannot stop the advancement of the gospel and the growing church. The more you try, the more it gains traction. God's sees to it. However, that doesn't stop the emotions Paul is harboring—some fear. Fear makes us hold back. Fear silences us. So the Lord appears to him in a vision and gave him 3 promises. **1) I am with you** (Matt. 28:20), **2) you will not be harmed**, and **3) I have many people in this city**. So keep sharing! There's a great lesson here for us:

When the going gets tough, remember God's promises.

No matter what we're going through, God doesn't leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5) and He works all things for our good (Rom. 8:28). Just because things get tough, doesn't mean He doesn't love us. God is using it. He is present with us. And we need to trust and obey.

But this vision prompts Paul to stay for at least 18 months. It's his first long stay while on a missionary journey. Normally, Paul would have moved on to a different city after ministering to the Gentiles briefly, but God intervenes this time and says, "*No, you're not moving on this time. You're going to stay and face this difficulty, but I am with you and will protect you.*" So think of this. For the first time, the Lord requires a drastic change in Paul's pattern of ministry because God sees things differently. When Paul can only see more difficulty, God sees a fruitful ministry. I don't want to over-psychoanalyze Paul here but I think Paul may have had a sort of recommissioning moment here, a time of having to recommit himself to the Lord's work. I think Paul wanted to move on. I don't think he enjoyed Corinth. I think the immorality tormented him. I think he was tired and wanted to go home, but he humbled himself and took a vow that he wouldn't quit here. He was going to stick it out. He was going to press on in the heavenward call in Christ (1 Cor. 9:24-27) and God revealing His perspective sure helped him do that.

When the going gets tough, ask God for His perspective.

12 But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, 13 saying, "This man persuades men 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 wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; 15 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.” 16 And he drove them away from the judgment seat. 17 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.

So when it comes to New Testament chronology, Gallio’s time in Corinth is very brief and certain. This occurred in the years **51-52 AD** so the Church movement is about 19 years old now. The Jews essentially take Paul to court before **Gallio** as Gallio sits on his **bema seat**. Sometimes we talk about the “bema seat” of Jesus Christ because Paul used the same words to refer to the moment when believers stand before the Lord to have their works judged. Every Christian will be saved, but not every Christian will receive equal rewards. In **1 Corinthians 3:10-15** Paul says we’ll stand before Jesus’ bema seat and our works are going to pass by us as if on a giant conveyor belt and pass through His purifying fire. Works that aren’t biblical are burned up in the fire like wood and hay and stubble but the works that are biblical and have proper motivation are like gold and silver and precious stones. When Paul writes that to the Corinthians, he is using a contextual illustration they are familiar with because of the Isthmian Games. This is helpful for us too when things get tough. We want to be found faithful and hear well done.

When the going getss tough, live for the eternal.

Today you can go and put your hand on this bema seat just Paul might have when he went to make his defense, but that was cut short because Gallio writes off the accusations as a religious matter between them. He doesn’t want anything to do with it and quite honestly, at first he seems respectable but the way he turns a blind eye to the beating of Sosthenes, reaffirms historical analysis of Gallio as anti-Semitic. It’s interesting too that **Sosthenes** is a name mentioned in **1 Corinthians 1:1**—“*Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother.*” This is speculation but I wonder if after Sosthenes was beaten, the Christians showed him Christlike love and he was won to Christ by it. He was won by their “care ministry”... just a thought. But that makes 2 synagogue rulers won to Christ.

II. LAYOVER IN EPHESUS. (VV. 18-22)

18 Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. 19 They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. 20 When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, 21 but taking leave of them and saying, “I will return to you again if God wills,” he set sail from Ephesus. 22 When he had landed at Caesarea [that is Caesarea Maritima on the coast], he went up and greeted the church [probably at Jerusalem], and went down to Antioch [in Syria, his sending church].

So many days following the bema seat, Paul decides to journey home to **Syria**, taking with him Aquila and Priscilla. **Cenchrea** was the port city east of Corinth a few miles. And it was here

where he has his **hair cut** for he was keeping a **vow**. Steven Ger said, “*The nature of this particular vow has generated a tremendous volume of speculation.*”⁷ We don’t know exactly what this vow was because we just don’t have enough information. But it does seem very close to a Nazirite vow from the OT Law where one would abstain from alcohol and uncleanness so as **to present oneself exclusively to the Lord to accomplish some objective or divine purpose.**⁸ **You were expressing complete devotion to the Lord.** We may think that’s weird since Paul’s not “under the Law”, but freedom from the Law must also entail the freedom to keep it or not (Romans 14), otherwise it’s not true freedom.⁹ During such a vow you would not cut your hair, like Samson, but when the vow was complete, he may have cut it and then would offer it in thanksgiving at Jerusalem at the temple where it was burned – similar to the way a sailor back then might cut his hair after a long, hard journey. Paul is finishing a long hard journey too.

When they arrive at **Ephesus**, Paul reasons in the synagogue. They want him to stay, but he needs to move on. We’ll talk more about Ephesus next time since it will become strategic for his 3rd missionary journey. But this is interesting, right? God has Paul stay long where there is much opposition. But where there is acceptance, Paul doesn’t stay long. Again, it doesn’t make sense from *our* perspective, but it does in God’s. Paul says, “*I will return to you if the Lord wills.*” I think **those words are the heart of the passage – If the Lords wills** – Lord willing. “*If the Lord wills*” was a common Jewish expression that every Christian ought to adopt it for their life, especially when the going gets tough because we want to fight for our will. Remember **James 4:13-15**, “*Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’*”

When the going gets tough, bow to the Lord’s will.

Everything we do and everything we pray about should be filtered through God’s will because He has a higher perspective of things. In prayer, we can’t help but make our desires known but we should always cap those off by saying praying according to *His* will because He knows what He’s doing and sees things we don’t see. **His ways and His thoughts are higher than our own.** What did Jesus do? He prayed for the hour of trial to pass from Him but He finalized it with, “*Not My will, but Your will be done*” (Mark 14:36) and He finished His race well. So did Paul. **If the gospel is going to keep advancing, we have to keep submitting.**

As we come to communion this morning, I’m not saying make a vow—I’m very leery of my own ability to keep a vow to the Lord—but maybe you need a sort of recommissioning moment today, a recommittal of your life to the Lord. I know I do every now and then. I think Paul was human enough to do that too. You see his personal commitment to the Lord in this passage. So after we gather our elements and sit down to reflect, reflect on your personal commitment to follow the Lord and his calling on your life. Resolve to follow Him. Ask God for His perspective. Maybe some of us just need to present ourselves to the Lord for the first time this morning for His exclusive use. You’ve accepted Christ as your Savior but you’ve never said,

“Lord, I’m all yours. Show me Your will for my life. You created me on purpose, with a purpose, and I want my life to glorify you.”

¹ <https://www.lincolnberean.org/sermon/daring-to-be-the-church-acts/providence-plans-and-a-different-perspective>

² Population estimates vary considerably among scholars. The numbers in the table are taken from the following sources: Rome—Connolly and Dodge, *Ancient City*, 127; Alexandria—Dorothy I. Sly, *Philo’s Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 1996), 44–51; Antioch—Frederick W. Norris, “Antioch of Syria,” *ABD* 1:265 (number does not include slaves or population of surrounding region); Ephesus—Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 88, cf. n. 6; Corinth—John R. McRay, “Corinth,” in *Evans, Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 228 (number does not include slaves); Jerusalem—Broshi, “Estimating the Population of Ancient Jerusalem,” *BAR* 4.2 (1978): 13–14.

Beitzel, B. J., Parks, J., & Mangum, D. (Eds.). (2019). *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

³ DeSilva, D. A. (2019). *The Social and Geographical World of Roman Corinth* (Acts 18:1–18; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1). In B. J. Beitzel, J. Parks, & D. Mangum (Eds.), *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation* (pp. 477–478). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁴ Dave Stotts, *Drive-Thru History: Acts to Revelation, Episode 10 – Ancient Corinth*.

⁵ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 507.

⁶ Steven Ger, *Acts: Beginning in Jerusalem...*, 220.

⁷ Ger, 223.

⁸ Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 5* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 361–362.

⁹ Ger, 223.