

God Uplifts the Downtrodden Acts 18:1-17

Introduction

Feeling overwhelmed when working in ministry is a common malady for those who minister vocationally and for those who minister as volunteers

Ministry comes with seemingly never-ending needs, demands, and expectations on the time and resources of the minister whether those resources are physical, mental or emotional as competing and often opposing burdens and opinions vie for attention

And since dissatisfaction or even outright disagreement is so often expressed more readily than thanks or cooperation discouragement is a common companion to those who seek to serve

Over the past several weeks we have been following along with Paul's travels on his second missionary journey and thus far the journey has been filled with ups and downs

The trip didn't start very well at all as Paul and Barnabas fought and ultimately split up over whether John Mark should be included on the trip

Barnabas took John Mark and headed to Cyprus while Paul teamed up with Silas and travelled **north through Syria** and then **west across Cilicia and Galatia** with the intention of visiting and strengthening the churches that Paul and Barnabas had planted on the first missionary trip

When they reached Lystra they were introduced to **Timothy** who joined the team and the trio visited the remainder of the churches as they travelled west

Having done what they initially set out to do the focus of the trip then changed to going to new territory in order to win people to Christ and plant churches

First, the team tried to go **south into the region known to them as Asia** but the Holy Spirit stopped them

Then they turned **north planning to go to Bithynia** but again the Spirit stopped them

So they continued west – which was the only direction left – to land's end at **Troas** on the coast of the Aegean Sea

Then, when God sent Paul a vision of a man urging him to come over to **Macedonia**, the team determined that God was directing them so they booked passage immediately and sailed to Macedonia

And the ups and downs continued

In **Philippi** they saw people accept Christ but Paul and Silas were also falsely accused, publicly stripped of their clothing and beaten with rods

Then they were locked up in the innermost part of the jail overnight and the next morning they were basically thrown out of town as troublemakers

They were able to remain in the next city, **Thessalonica**, for a longer period of time and they had a great deal of success in seeing people become Christ-followers

But their success made the Jewish leaders jealous so they hired a mob to drive the missionaries out of town

Moving on to **Berea** they found the people there were even more receptive to their message but the troublemakers from Thessalonica soon followed and raised trouble there forcing Paul to move on to Athens

In **Athens** Paul did his best to present Jesus to the people with only minimal success as some believed but most of the people either openly mocked him or politely put him off

It seems that Paul hadn't planned on spending much time in Athens from the start so when he saw that the people of Athens largely had hearts that were hardened he headed to **Corinth** which is where we pick up the account today

Please join me in **Acts 18** and follow along as I read **verses 1-17**

1After 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.

5When 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. **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.

12But 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.

I. Hard Times Happen to Us All

When I think of the apostle Paul the words that describe him are words like: “courageous,” “steadfast,” “confident,” and “resolute”

Paul to me seems like the Energizer bunny – he just keeps going, and going, and going no matter what

He was a man on a mission and he never stopped moving – he was determined to do well in completing the task that he had been given by Jesus himself and in many ways he seems larger than life – almost superhuman in his determination

Yet we find that all of the ups and downs of this second missionary journey had taken their toll on him and he had plenty of time to reflect on all that he was going through during the 50-mile walk from Athens to Corinth

And by the time he got to Corinth he was feeling pretty low

Paul wrote about his arrival at Corinth in his first letter to the Corinthians listen to what he said about his state of mind in **1 Corinthians 2:1-3**:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in **weakness** and in **fear** and **much trembling**

We don't often think of Paul in this way but here he reveals that he was a human being who wrestled with the same feelings that we wrestle with

Looking back at **Acts 17:15** we remember that when the brothers who travelled with Paul to Athens left him there to go back to Berea he sent them with orders for Silas and Timothy to join him there as soon as possible

We don't know for certain exactly how long Paul remained in Athens but we do know that Silas and Timothy didn't catch up with Paul until he was already in Corinth

And when we look at **1 Thessalonians 3:1-2** we see why

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith

It's not surprising that Paul was feeling alone and even though he had made the decision to delay the arrival of his teammates, the 50 mile walk from Athens to Corinth no doubt gave him plenty of time to feel the isolation

He may well have felt every mark on his back from being beaten in Philippi

He was likely stung by the memory of the hardship his ministry had brought to Jason and the other believers in Thessalonica, how he had to flee from a profitable ministry in Berea, and the mockery and broad rejection of his message by the intellectuals in Athens

It shouldn't be too unexpected to learn that Paul's shoulders were slumped a bit as he walked into Corinth

Ministry doesn't always go smoothly – even when we are at the center of God's will – **hard times happen to us all**

Feelings of weariness, rejection, and isolation are sure to come and when they do we are bound to share the same emotions that tormented Paul

II. God's Provision for Restoration

But when we look at this passage we see all the ways that God provided for Paul and aided in his restoration

The first thing we notice is that God provided Paul with **like-minded companions**

We aren't told how Paul came to find Aquila and his wife, Priscilla but we see that they were fellow Jews who had been expelled from Rome and that, like Paul, they were tentmakers

Traditionally, rabbis were expected to earn their own support so as to be able to teach for free and Paul continued to practice that tradition as he preached the gospel

Perhaps Paul was actively looking for work or maybe he just wandered down by the marketplace and bumped into them but however he met this couple he soon found himself working alongside them in their business

It appears that they may well have been believers before they met Paul because he never counts them among those that he lists as personal converts and, if so, they were more than fellow countrymen they were siblings in Christ

Timothy and Silas had not yet caught up with Paul but he was no longer alone

And we seldom, if ever, need to labor alone

One of the things I try to emphasize with people is that they should always strive to have someone work alongside them in ministry – even if it's a one-person job

Because the benefits of fellowship enjoyed in laboring side-by-side are just too great to ignore

The author of Ecclesiastes emphasizes this reality in **Ecclesiastes 4:9-12** which says:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

God has provided us with like-minded companions to aid us in our labors – let's take advantage of that fact

Then we see that God provided Paul with **a distraction from ministry** in the work of making tents

Anything we engage in with passion and energy can be wearying – even when all goes well but especially when we are involved in a battle

We can know we're doing what God wants us to do but the struggle is real and we can develop fatigue and start to feel beat down

I think that's what Paul was experiencing so God graciously gave him something completely different to do with his hands as a restorative endeavor

I know that I benefit from the outlet of making music because it's an activity that is completely different from the normal ministry activities of the week and it provides a much needed mental and emotional break while still being a useful, productive activity

Sometimes we just need to do and think about something completely different no matter how committed we are to continuing the mission of Christ

Notice though that Paul was still engaged in ministry – he didn't completely walk away – it just wasn't the same every day total involvement that he had been occupied with for some time

Then we see that the third way that God provided was **financially**

The work Paul did with Aquila and Priscilla provided him with money to live on and we see in **2 Corinthians 11:9** that when Timothy and Silas came they brought a financial gift from the believers in Macedonia which allowed Paul to once again give himself fully to the ministry of the Word

So many times God provides us with just what we need just when we need it

Paul needed a bit of a break from full-time ministry so God gave him a job to do that provided for his needs and friends to work alongside him when he was feeling low and alone

Then in his perfect timing God brought Paul's co-laborers to Corinth and provided the means to allow Paul to return to his chief order of business

Next we want to notice that God gave Paul **success in his ministry**

Luke doesn't tell us how many converts Paul made in Corinth before the opposition started but as he had seen many times before some of the Jews "opposed and reviled him"

This time it seems like he was fed up with the stiff-necked response of the Jews so he shook out his garments as if to make certain that not even a speck of dust from the synagogue would cling to him as he left and he let his opposition know in no uncertain terms that he had fulfilled his obligation to them and they were no on their own

They likely were happy with the thought that they had gotten rid of Paul but he didn't go far

He set up shop in next door in the home of Titius Justus and began to minister there

And then as if to add insult to injury Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, became a believer along with his entire household

And many other of the Corinthians became Christ-followers after hearing Paul present the gospel

So God rewarded Paul's faithfulness by giving him a number of converts

I can tell you from experience one of the most energizing experiences you will ever have is being used to lead someone to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ

General Omar Bradley once said of General George Patton that a headline in the papers would cause him to take another 30 miles of enemy territory

And so it is with having success in ministry – it's energizing!

But still, in the back of his mind, Paul must have thought, "Here we go again!"

He had seen this pattern repeated over and over – success leading to jealousy leading to opposition and then expulsion or imprisonment –and in Lystra they had even tried to murder him on his first missionary journey

It's possible that Paul was planning his exit from Corinth before another mob could show up to either try to kill him or drag him before another magistrate to have him beaten and imprisoned

The Lord knew what Paul was thinking and feeling so he appeared to him one night in a vision to give him an extra boost of encouragement by giving him **three promises** –

And these promises were not just for Paul but are also for all believers at all times and in all places

III. God's Promises to His People

Look with me again at **verse 9** where we see that the Lord first gave Paul a command –

“Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent”

The tense of the verb here indicates that the Lord told Paul to stop being afraid demonstrating that Paul was at that time afraid of what might be coming his way

In effect the Lord was saying to Paul, “Don’t be afraid any longer but continue doing what you’ve been doing in boldly sharing the gospel”

And then he gave Paul three reasons to be courageous **verse 10**

First, the Lord reminded Paul of his **presence**

The Lord gave Paul the assurance of his continual presence as he told him, “I am with you”

I remember when my girls were small and they would be heading into an unfamiliar situation that they weren’t really sure about they would always insist that I go with them

It’s easier to be brave when you know you’re not alone and even easier when you know someone bigger than you is your companion

When he gave his disciples the Great Commission in **Matthew 28:20**, Jesus promised them “I am with you always, to the end of the age”

And since we are still in the church age that means that the promise of his presence is still in force for us today

Knowing that the Lord is our constant companion is a great confidence booster and we should be able to live without fear no matter what forces are arrayed against us

Because next we see that the Lord assured Paul of his **protection** by telling him “no one will attack you to harm you”

Obviously this was a specific promise meant specifically for Paul’s sojourn in Corinth and the Lord was telling Paul that he wouldn’t suffer harm from anyone while he was ministering there

And he didn’t but Paul was attacked and he did suffer at the hands of others – remember he had been stoned in Lystra and beaten with rods in Philippi – and he would suffer again in other places even to the point of death in Rome

We also saw Peter and John suffer beatings at the hands of the Jewish authorities in earlier chapters of Acts

So, it’s fair for us to ask in what sense we enjoy God’s protection and whether it is circumstantial

We need to be clear that there is no blanket guarantee of physical safety for all believers – the martyrs throughout history testify to that fact

But we do know that God stands as the gatekeeper of our lives and nothing happens to us without his permission

Then we need to accept that God’s glory is more important than our safety and should we need to suffer for his purposes, we will be sustained through the suffering

And then we need to recognize that there is a huge difference between the concepts of “hurt” and “harm”

Many things in life hurt us but are ultimately for our benefit

Take going to the dentist for example

I have long dreaded and despised going to the dentist because what they do there often hurts

But I still go every 6 months because what they do there is also beneficial to my overall health

And even though it may hurt in the short term I am not harmed by the experience but rather am helped by the hurt

The same is true for the Christian – the world may hurt us but it can never harm us in any sense that matters in eternity because we have the seal of the Holy Spirit upon us which guarantees God’s ultimate protection

Third, the Lord restated his **purpose**

The Lord revealed to Paul “I have many in this city who are my people”

I don’t want to get into a big discussion about election and pre-destination today because that would detract from our purposes

However, I’m confident that we can agree that since God is all-knowing he knows who his people are even before they are saved

And we can agree that the only way to be saved is to accept Christ and to do that one must hear the gospel message

So basically the Lord is telling Paul, “You have a lot of work to do here”

First, Paul had to present Christ so that people could believe and then he had his work cut out for him because those new believers needed to be taught all about what it means to be a Christ-follower

So we see in **verse 11** that Paul settled in for a nice, long stay of a year and a half in Corinth teaching the Word of God to the Corinthians with the Lord by his side, granting him his protection, and seeing his people saved and disciplined

It’s a really cool thing to realize that these promises are just as real to us as they were to Paul

But we also need to recognize that we share the same mission that Paul had of being the Lord’s witnesses to those around us and be just as diligent about carrying out the work

IV. God’s Objectives Will be Fulfilled

In the final verses of our passage we see that **God’s objectives will be fulfilled** in spite of opposition

Eventually, the Jews decided the time was right and they once again dragged Paul before the Roman authority of the region trying to get him punished

The charge they brought against Paul was a familiar one – that Paul was advocating an illegal foreign religion

Although they tried to remain ambiguous with their claim it’s clear they wanted Gallio to think that Paul was violating Roman law

And the Lord was faithful to his promise to protect Paul as Paul didn’t even need to speak a word in his own defense

Gallio wanted nothing to do with their claim as he saw the whole affair being an internal squabble amongst two divergent sects of Judaism and so he refused to get involved

Not only that he drove the Jews from his court which it seems gave the citizenry of Corinth tacit permission to engage in anti-Jewish behavior by seizing and beating the new head of the synagogue right in front of Gallio’s court

We often despair over our government and fear its interference in church matters but here we see God demonstrate once again that his work will not be thwarted because he controls those who pull the levers of government

Of course, this doesn’t mean that things will always go as we think they should or that we couldn’t have an easier time if we had a friendlier government but we need to always remember that God’s objectives for this world will be fulfilled in due course

Not only did God see fit to protect Paul from a negative action by Gallio but he also saw to it that Christianity enjoyed a period of protection as a result of the Jews bringing the matter before a regional proconsul

Gallio's non-action and his declaration that he saw nothing illegal about Paul's ministry set a legal precedent that was unforeseen by the Jews when they brought the case to him

In effect, their actions helped rather than harmed the cause of Christ because other magistrates would look to what Gallio had done if and when any cases came before them

Also, in **verse 17** we see that they beat a man named Sosthenes who likely took over as ruler of the synagogue after Crispus had been removed for becoming a Christian

We don't know for certain just who the pronoun "they" refers to (whether it was disgruntled Jews or opportunistic Gentiles who saw their chance to beat a Jew) but it seems they inadvertently further the cause of Christ

Because if this Sosthenes is the same man who Paul mentions in **1 Corinthians 1:1**, then his unmerited beating may well have resulted in his seeing the injustice of attacking Christianity and caused him to become a believer

What a great thing it would be to have two synagogue heads turn to Christ in spite of the organized opposition to it

Conclusion

Occasionally feeling beat up, or should I say beat down, in ministry is a common occurrence and should be expected when one is being faithful to the Christian life

Service is not always welcome and it often brings criticism and opposition and when we spend our time and energy going against the flow we get tired

Paul faced an uphill battle as he went from city to city fulfilling his commission to spread the gospel and make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ

Paul admits that he was trembling with weakness and fear when he walked into Corinth to begin ministering there

And he was clearly afraid as he ministered and opposition began to build - otherwise the Lord would have had no reason to tell him to stop being afraid

The reality is, if it could happen to Paul it can happen to any of us and we will face times of doubt and discouragement as we are faithful to continuing the mission that Jesus began

But as we've seen today, God isn't surprised, shocked, or outraged by the fear and weakness of his children

Rather, God takes action on our behalf as he seeks to uplift the downtrodden

Look with me at **Psalms 103:13-14** -

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

God formed man from the dust of the ground and he knows well that we will grow weary and that fatigue often leads to fear

So he stands ready to assist us and to give us protection, respite, and restoration when we need it

Still, when we're being knocked around we can't help but become a bit twitchy and when fear sets in, it's normal to start looking for an escape and we can be very tempted to give up just to relieve the fear

It's then that we need to take to heart the fact that the safest place that we can ever be is right smack in the center of God's will even if being at the center of God's will means we struggle and maybe even suffer for a time

So when fear, weakness, and trembling come creeping into your life recognize first of all that it's normal and then remember that God has promised to be with us and to protect us from harm through it all and that God's purposes will be fulfilled no matter what

Let's pray