

Acts 18:1-17 (1984 NIV)
The Lord's Encouragement: "I Am with You"

Introduction

In Acts 17, we find Paul preaching and reaching out to the people in Athens. That city was the centre of philosophical intellectualism in those days. When Paul was there, he carried a compassionate conviction to speak readily to people's loss without God. We also see Paul getting to know where these people were before he got them to know who the true God is.

And what was the result? No great numbers in conversion. There were some who believed. It was hard work and hard ground, but the gospel seed was sowed and Paul moved on.

Today we come to Acts 18 and we find Paul now in Corinth, another Greek city. Corinth was a commercial centre located on a narrow land bridge that connected the northern part of Greece with the southern part. All commercial land traffic going between northern and southern Greece had to go through Corinth. In similar fashion all sea traffic had to pass through Corinth that had a port on the eastern and western sides of the land bridge. At the time of Paul's arrival the city would have been very prosperous. So Corinth was a great place to do business and make money.

Corinth was also a place where you could have much freedom to express and experience your pleasures in life. One of the most distinguishing features of the city was the Temple of Aphrodite—the Greek equivalent of the Roman goddess of love (i.e. Venus). It was said that there were about 1,000 temple prostitutes and they entered the city each evening to ply their trade. One worshipped the goddess of love by having sexual relations with one of these prostitutes. Corinth was a city where you could express and experience the pleasure of sexual freedom yet felt very spiritual about it. In fact, if someone commented that you lived like a Corinthian in those days, it was not a good thing. It didn't mean that you had a high standard of living, but a low standard of morality.

So Corinth was a great city to be in if you want to do business and make big money, or if you want to look for sexual freedom and permissiveness. But what if you want to live like a Christian or do the work of Christ? The answer is obvious—it would be an uphill task.

When Paul first arrived in Corinth, it is not too far-fetched to say that he was greatly disturbed and overwhelmed by the spiritual and moral depravity before him. And that's why the Lord had to come to his side and said to him in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10).

Indeed in difficult times, the Lord's words "I am with you" will always be a great encouragement.

If I have to pick words to describe the apostle Paul, I would say, "bold", "fearless", "courageous", and "determined". I would not think of words like "fearful", "discouraged", "distressed", or "weak". And yet when Paul described how he felt during his early days in Corinth, he used words like "distress" (1 Thess. 3:7), "weakness", "fear", and "much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3). Even though he was a giant in the faith, Paul still struggled with the same emotions that we all struggle with.

Paul was facing many discouraging factors when he first arrived in Corinth to live like a Christian and to do the work of Christ.

I. What are some discouraging factors we have to deal with in ministry?

1. One of these must be the feeling of being alone.

It has been said that the loneliest place in the world is in a crowd. You know what it is like when you get in the middle of a crowd, when there is no one around whom you know, and it seems that it is you against the world. That's the situation Paul found himself in.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he didn't have Barnabas with him, he didn't have Timothy with him, he didn't have Silas with him, and he didn't have any of his former friends or travelling companions with him. He was a man alone. He looked around and he found no friends. He was a man alone in a strange city—no friends AND no funds.

2. A second discouraging factor is the difficult environment.

Paul looked around him at a city filled with immorality, where people were caught up in the pursuit of prosperity and pleasure. I can imagine him saying, "Lord, there's no way we're going to make an impact here. Lord, these people simply don't care. These people are so wrapped up in the here and now, that they care nothing about eternity. Let's forget about doing your work here."

Maybe you too cry out in different words, but the frustration and discouragement is still the same. Maybe you are saying, "Lord, there's no use trying to live like a Christian in this place. The people here belong to a different breed. They are so trapped in living for the here and now. They don't care anything about eternity. If I can't win them over, I might as well go join them."

Have you ever felt like that? Indeed difficult environment can discourage us.

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3. A third discouraging factor is pressing circumstances.

In v. 3 we read that Paul worked as a tent-maker during the week. And then in v. 4 we read that he reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue every Sabbath. Paul had three pressing situations facing him:

- First, he had the responsibility of making a living for himself.
- Second, he had the added burden of weekend ministry. He was teaching and preaching in the Synagogue every Saturday.
- Third, it had to do with the pattern in his life as a pioneering missionary. When he received support from the church of Macedonia through Silas and Timothy, he was able to devote himself fully to preaching and testifying for Christ (v. 5). Then the Jews in the synagogue opposed and abused him, and he had to turn away from them and go to the Gentiles. Actually he went to the house next door owned by a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper of God. Though rejected by the Jews, the good news was that the synagogue ruler, Crispus, together with his household came to faith in Jesus Christ. So were many of the Corinthians. All these people believed and were baptized (vv. 6-8). And like the pattern in his life as a pioneering missionary, persecution came as a result of all this apparent success. The Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him to face the Roman proconsul Gallio, charging him for violating Roman law (vv.12-13).

We can be discouraged when we try to live like a Christian or do the work of Christ. But the Lord does not want us to be trapped in a spirit of discouragement.

II. How does the Lord show His faithfulness to help us out of discouragement?

1. The Lord is faithful in raising up people to co-labour with us (vv. 1-5).

VV. 2-3 tells us that Paul “met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them”.

Paul teamed up with Aquila and Priscilla in their tent-making business in order to support himself. Today, we still call a missionary who supports himself on the field by working in the local economy as a “tent-

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maker”.

In v. 4, we are told that on “every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks”. It would appear that because Paul worked as a tent-maker, he had to limit his ministry to what he could do on the Sabbath. But in his loneliness, the Lord sent Aquila and Priscilla to be his friends.

Aquila and his wife Priscilla were just two of many Jews who were chased out of Rome by Emperor Claudius. They were probably devout Jews but not believers in Jesus Christ when they first met Paul. But because they were of the same trade, they clicked well together. And it was not very long before Paul led Aquila and Priscilla to Christ. These two are frequently mentioned in the New Testament as faithful workers and helpers of the apostle.

Paul led them to Christ while he was at work. I hope that will encourage some of you to use work as a place to get to know people, to understand their needs, and as a normal place for evangelism. The workplace is an excellent place to make contacts with people who are searching for answers in life.

And we see how the Lord slowly but surely brought people to Paul as he struggled with his initial feeling of being alone. In the persons of Silas and Timothy, he found not just old friends but fresh funds as well from the Macedonian church. In the house of Titius Justus, he could preach openly to the Gentiles. In the conversion of the synagogue ruler Crispus and his household and many Corinthians, he found new relationships.

How will the Lord help us out of our fear and discouragement? How will the Lord reassure us that He is indeed with us? Like Paul, the Lord will do this by bringing people helpers into our lives so that we will not feel alone.

If you are involved in a Bible study group as a marketplace person, or Campus Crusade ministry as an undergraduate, or military fellowship as a National Serviceman, or Mums-in-Touch as a homemaker, or cell group as a church member, you are already in some kind of an environment that allows you to be encouraged or be an encourager. So open your eyes and ask, “Who is the Lord using to encourage me? Whom is the Lord using me to encourage?”

When we are saved, the Holy Spirit baptizes us into the body of Christ. We become members of one another under Jesus Christ our living Head. God did not design us to go it alone. We desperately need one another, even though we sometimes needle one another! Ministry should be team ministry where we complement one another, pray for one another, and bear one another's

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burdens. We honour the Lord when we labour together as His people for His cause.

2. The Lord is faithful in bringing forth fruits, even in the face of difficulties (vv. 6-11).

Notice how the Lord spoke to Paul in vv. 9-10 – “One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.’”

These were indeed comforting and reassuring words. That the words “I am with you” are encouraging is obvious. The Lord promised His protection and presence. But how are the words “I have many people in this city” encouraging? There were still few Christians in Corinth. So the “many people” that the Lord spoke about surely did not point to believers in Jesus Christ.

When Paul looked around Corinth, what did he humanly see? Maybe he saw only a city of people so trapped in the here and now with not a care for spiritual things. But these were the “many people” whom the Lord said “I have”—i.e. they belonged to Him. He could see things Paul could not see. He saw these pagan Corinthians as potential recipients of His saving grace. If Paul would not fear, would not keep silent, would keep on speaking, these would come to know the Lord one day. If Paul would not be discouraged and lose heart, he would see the birth and growth of the Corinthian church one day.

Slow progress is not a guarantee for barrenness. Rather it is a challenge for us to keep living like Christ and do the work of Christ. In His time, our labour will be proven to be not in vain.

Maybe you have such a burden for that someone—his salvation, his life, etc. Maybe you have such hopes for something in church to happen. You have cried and prayed and done everything you know how, and yet you see no progress. To you God says, “I have many people in this place. You may not see anything happening, you may not see that person changing at all, but I have many people in this place. I see things you cannot see. So don’t quit living for me and doing my work.”

How will the Lord help us out of our fear and discouragement? How will the Lord reassure us that He is indeed with us? Like Paul, the Lord will do this by reminding us that He sees what we cannot see—the apparent futility we see will turn into His fruits in His power and in His time.

3. The Lord is faithful in watching over those who serve His purpose

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(vv. 12-17).

We are told in vv. 12-17: “While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court. ‘This man,’ they charged, ‘is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.’ Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, ‘If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. 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.’ So he had them ejected from the court. Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever.”

The Jews were upset that Paul was preaching to the Gentiles and that he was having much success. So they had Paul hauled into court. Notice that Paul didn’t even get a chance to open his mouth—he was about to speak (v. 14)—but the Roman proconsul Gallio had the case thrown out of court even before Paul could say anything. The Jews accused Paul of violating the Roman law. But Gallio was discerning and refused to be a pawn of the Jews. He asked them to settle their dispute with Paul because it had to do with interpretations pertaining to their Jewish religion.

The Lord used a Roman area ruler to deliver Paul from the united attack of the Jews. Paul didn’t even have to speak a word in his defence in court. The Lord’s promise to Paul that “no one is going to attack and harm you” in v. 10 was fulfilled in the person of Gallio. The Lord can even use the most unlikely and unexpected person or means.

“No man is going to attack and harm you.” This is not a general promise that can be applied to every situation. But in this instance, God promised His protection over Paul. The application for us is not that God’s servants are always guaranteed physical safety. Many of His servants are killed because of their witness. But we can know that no one can touch us unless it is the Father’s purpose, and that as long as He has a mission for us to accomplish, He will keep His protective hand upon us.

How will the Lord help us out of our fear and discouragement? How will the Lord reassure us that He is indeed with us? Like Paul, the Lord can use even the most unlikely and unexpected, and He calls us not to limit how He can or will work.

Conclusion

On 25 June 2009, I received news that a dear friend had passed into unconsciousness in the hospital. She had a condition in which the aorta artery near her heart was tearing over the years. A few weeks

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earlier, it was discovered that the size of the tear was dangerously substantial. She was warded and while awaiting surgery, she had a stroke. Though she recovered, she had become very much weakened. But in the afternoon of 25 June 2009, something happened and she slipped into unconsciousness.

Somehow, I felt deep inside me that her days on earth were nearing their end. So I decided to visit her in spite of the restrictive access to patients in view of the H1N1 virus. Indeed, I had no difficulty getting clearance to see her in the ward (they were flexible about hospital visits for patients in critical condition).

When I was in the room, I saw that her family members were there, her best friend was there, and many co-workers in the Lord were there. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing heavily with the help of a life-support system. After staying for a while, I took my leave as I had a church meeting later in the day. Before that, I moved to her side and whispered into her ear, "The Lord is pleased with all that you have done for Him. Now you can rest well in Him." With that I left the hospital and knowing that I had said my last words to a dear friend. She passed away about two hours later. She had just turned 50.

On the same day, a famous world figure also died at age 50—Michael Jackson. He was reported to have a cardiac arrest at home. Apparently he died a lonely death with no family members, friends and fans by his side in spite of his mega achievements as arguably the most successful entertainer in the pop music world in this century.

As I reflected on this, I realized that my friend had actually passed away in a very blessed fashion—with family, friends, and co-workers by her side, with people saying their last good words to her. And as I thought about this, I felt encouraged—it was as if the Lord was saying to me, "In the persons and presence of family, friends, and co-workers, I was with her till her last breath."

Indeed at a time when one is facing difficulty, the Lord's words "I am with you" will always be a great encouragement.

The Lord encouraged Paul, "I am with you." And he was with Paul in the persons of Aquila, Priscilla, Silas, Timothy, Titius Justus, Crispus, the first Corinthian believers, and even in the person of an unlikely and unexpected figure—the Roman proconsul Gallio. These were the people helpers whom the Lord brought to Paul.

Somehow it helps to know that a great apostle like Paul could be discouraged and even afraid. Even the Apostle Paul needed to know that he was not alone. As close to the Lord as he was, Paul still needed

other people. He needed to know that he was not in the fight alone.

The Lord is faithful to us, especially in times of difficulty. His faithfulness does not mean that He exempts us from trials, but rather that He sustains us through them.

Let's persevere in living for and serving the Lord because He Himself is faithful to us, and He says to you and me today, "I am with you." Amen!