

A man was shoveling snow from his driveway when two boys carrying snow shovels approached him. "*Shovel your snow, Mister?*" one of them asked. "*Only two dollars!*"

Puzzled, the man replied, "*Can't you see that I'm doing it myself?*"

"*Sure,*" said the enterprising lad; "*that's why we asked. We get most of our business from people who are half through and feel like quitting!*"

I think that there are certain times... in every believer's life... when they feel like quitting a task that they know God has given them to accomplish. Ministry hardship has many say from time-to-time... "*This is not what I thought I signed up for...*"

Maybe you have been directly challenged by someone you have been placed in a position to lead. ... (Or others have been critical.) ... Perhaps ministry has required more time than your family is willing for you to give to it. ... Maybe others who you rely upon... do not show enough excitement - and definitely not enough commitment... and it all looks as though it will fall on your shoulders – again ! No one knows the level of your sacrifice... and no one seems to care.

For me... I am sometimes disheartened by a truth that is succinctly described in 2 Corinthians 5:7. ... Do you happen to recall what that verse says...? ... The verse tells us that - "*We walk by faith, not by sight.*"

As we make our way through life... we must continuously trust in what is unseen... rather than measuring our lives... determining our worth... and making our choices... based on circumstances we can observe and predict.

Wouldn't you prefer to walk by sight?! ... Wouldn't it be nice... if clear directions were given... doors opened at just the right moment... and words of encouragement were offered when we needed them...?

It is just down-right TOUGH... to trust an unseen God... Isn't it?

I have to remind myself... that if God didn't make Himself obscure at times... I would never learn to have faith. ... I mean... doesn't Hebrews 11:1 define faith as "*the conviction of things not seen*"? ... And 5 verses later it says - "*without faith it is impossible to please God*... ... That means therefore.... it is required that God be hidden at times... It is required that His purposes be unclear... BUT that we trust Him nonetheless.

Today... we will study Acts 18... in which we will see a lot of faith-producing hiddenness of God (at first.) ... And then we'll see the ways God acts to encourage His servants. ... Every believer who follows Christ will be engaged in ministry of some sort... and therefore... we all need the encouragements that we'll find in our passage today.

As we open this 18th chapter in Acts... we come to the end of what is called "the second missionary journey of Paul". The city of Corinth... which he is about to enter... is effectively the last stop on the journey.

Paul was a person who made a brilliant contrast to the pagan philosophers of Athens... with their studied... philosophical detachment. ... We saw last week that... for a man like Paul... who burned with prophetic unction... a smug complacency in his hearers was too much to bear. ... So he left Athens in search of more receptive fields. ... So eager was Paul to get out

of Athens... that he did not even wait for Silas and Timothy... (who were – at that time - en route.)

Paul must have felt at least a little dejected as he walked the fifty miles to Corinth. Since coming to Europe, he had suffered a terrible beating in Philippi, civil rejection in Thessalonica and Berea, and indifference in Athens.

Acts 18:1-4

Piecing together the evidence from Paul's Epistles... and the history that we have already seen in Acts... it is not difficult for us to picture Paul as discouraged at this time. ... Hurtful rejection had to have accumulated... and weighed heavily on him as he traveled from Athens to Corinth.

Paul had left four cities (each one after the other... Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!) under duress—beaten, dismissed, harassed, and ridiculed. ... He was alone (without his missionary companions.) ... You may remember that when he was forced to leave Berea and went on to Athens... he left word for Timothy and Silas to join him as soon as possible. But they never came.

First Thessalonians 3:1-2 comments on correspondence between Paul and his friends. Evidently Paul had realized that there were problems in Thessalonica, and perhaps in Philippi. So instead of having Timothy join him, he sent him back to Thessalonica to care for the church there. Silas may well have gone back to Philippi. So Paul began and ended his time in Athens by himself, and now he was moving on to the next place.

Now... in verse two... (which we just read)... we discover that Paul was also broke when he came to Corinth. ... We know this... because when he got to Corinth... he departed from his characteristic pattern.

Upon entering a new city... in all the other times in Acts... the first activity that is reported... is how he began to do ministry. ... He and his companions went out to the riverside where they supposed there would be a place of prayer... or they went into a synagogue... and began to teach.

That is not what we are told about Paul's entry into Corinth. ... It is very striking that this time a different emphasis is made. What is the first thing that Dr. Luke writes...? Paul... (first thing) has to get a job and find a place to stay.

We certainly don't know all of the patterns of funding of missionaries in the first century. Churches... for sure... gave gifts to support those who did the work of the gospel... but without ATMs... wire transfers... credit cards... or even a postal service... those gifts would have been L O N G in coming.

Does it stretch our imaginations too far... if we were to suppose that there must have been times... when Paul even had enough money to feed himself? ... What sort of shelter could he find as he walked the fifty-plus miles from Athens to Corinth? How many days would it have taken him? Is Paul so different from you and I... that he would not have walked slowly... with his shoulders stooped... discouraged at heart... lonely... and broke as he entered Corinth...? (I don't think we should imagine him different in that sense... than you or I...)

The last thing to consider... is what Paul would have HAD to have known... about what he would find in the city of Corinth. Corinth had a well-established reputation. ... It was the most morally depraved and unpredictable of the cities of its day. It had a reputation throughout the Roman Empire for loose living.

During Paul's day... if you wanted to criticize someone as being out of control sexually and generally depraved... you would have at your disposal a name to call them... that everyone would understand – “*You Corinthian.*” ... In the popular dramas of the first century... whenever a Corinthian character showed up in a scene... he was inevitably drunk. Corinth was a trading city where big deals could be done... fortunes could be made and lost. It was a place of risks and rewards and shady characters to beware of... a place brimming with pride. ... Prosperous and shamelessly immoral... Corinth was a city where only the tough survive! Many have likened it to Las Vegas... calling it “the Las Vegas of its time.”

Taking all of these things together (Paul's rejection in city after city... his loneliness... his poverty... and the concern he would have felt about the place he was now going)... we know that Paul was discouraged. ... More than any of the reasons that I have cited... we know this... because of Paul's own words... He tells us so in the first letter to the Corinthians...

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,

But he went to Corinth anyway. He didn't quit... hoping someone else would do it. ... He didn't give up his calling. ... He lived out his own (later) description of the Christian life... ("he walked by faith, not by sight.") ... He went into Corinth without any assurance ahead of time of how God would meet his needs... only the assurance that God would do so. ... And He did!

God providentially put in Paul's path... some good Christian people. They would prove a great help and blessing to him over the years. Thus we find in Paul's epistles repeated mention of them. ...This dedicated couple served most faithfully and even risked their lives for Paul (Rom. 16:3-4). They assisted him in Ephesus (we will see in next week's passage - Acts 18:18-28.) ... And Ephesus will be where they even host a church in their home (according to 1 Cor. 16:19).

Aquila and Priscilla would become an important part of Paul's "team" and he thanked God for them. They are a good example of how "lay ministers" can help to further the work of the Lord. Every pastor and missionary needs people like Aquila and Priscilla... and I am so thankful that God has collected so many of them here at Living Water! You may never know... this side of Heaven... how much of an encouragement you are to me!

Think about the gift of new friends. Perhaps sometime you went to a new city or a new school... or into a new ministry environment... and there you met someone for the first time and found your hearts knitted together. You found that they loved Christ as you did... and they had a wonderful way of expressing it. ... They had a great sense of humor that clicked with yours. It is a great gift from God to let us sometimes flower in a new relationship. That is what took place for Paul with Aquila and Priscilla.

It's important to observe that they lived **and** worked together. (Aquila and Priscilla invited Paul into their home.) ... As tentmakers they worked in the leather-working area of the city's commercial district. Aquila and Priscilla and Paul would be haggling over prices together... sharing tools... worrying about the cost of goatskins. ... They would talk about Scripture and Old Testament prophecy in that setting. (This may be how Aquilla and Pricilla came to Christ.) Then they could go home together. ... If they were living in our time... perhaps they would come home after work... turn on Netflix... and pop some popcorn. ... They shared their life together. It must have been a great gift to Paul to be taken into the home of Aquila and Priscilla. They were a wonderful couple who loved each other and loved him.

My call to you is to take your skills... opportunities... and strengths and offer them to the Lord... so that you are reaching out to folks you don't yet know. Often we have to push ourselves to get out of the circles we run in all the time... but God's blessings are to be found when we intentionally share life together with others.

Let's continue with the story. Verse 5...

Acts 18:5

Luke doesn't mention it here in Acts... but we know from Paul's letters... that when Silas and Timothy came... they brought some money with them that they had collected in Thessalonica and probably in Philippi as well. ... So Paul... who had had a job for some weeks or months... was able to give it up and teach full time. Verse 5 tells us that Paul was able to go back to

being a full-time missionary. (He was only a temporary tent-maker... here in Corinth.)

Paul entered Corinth in weakness... out of money... and in much fear... and trembling. But God had a special couple waiting there... who would be tremendously encouraging... and eventually financial support arrived and Paul no longer needed his tent-making job.

However – God would still have Paul walk by faith... and not by sight. And the Christian walk (as you probably know)... is more like a roller-coaster... It is filled with highs and lows...

Acts 18:6-10

At just the right time... God brought another friend into Paul's life... a Gentile God-fearing man named Titus Justus. ... Paul departed from the synagogue and began using the house of Titus Justus as his preaching station... right next to the synagogue! ... This was certainly a wise decision on Paul's part... because it gave him continued contact with the Jews and Gentile proselytes... and as a result... even the chief ruler of the synagogue was converted! (Crispus was a person of status and wealth. He was responsible for the synagogue services.)

Whenever we witness the power of the Gospel... our hearts are tremendously encouraged! (Are they not...?) ... Conversions like Crispus' remind us of the power of the Gospel. Sometimes the people who we would think would never come to Christ are the first to be saved. The power of the Gospel must never be underestimated. Do you have a certain friend

or family member... who you would consider to be the least likely person to come to Christ...? That is who you need to be praying diligently for...

We can also see the power of the Gospel in that verse 8 says “*And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.*” These many others included a group of vile sinners. Paul speaks of this in the first letter to the church at Corinth.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Somehow though... in the midst of this great ministry... Paul became so depressed that it necessitated a vision of God to restore him. Perhaps after experiencing the dispassionate culture shock in Athens... and going right into another cultural shock (this time because of such immorality) Paul was wiped out... and apparently ready to quit.

Something else to consider... Paul was experiencing great success in Corinth. ... But each and every success Paul has had (in Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and, in its own way, Athens)... these always led to persecution. Why wouldn't he expect it here...? ... So judging by the message of his vision... this great servant of Christ... once again became discouraged... fearful... and insecure. It is interesting that when the Lord spoke to Paul, he didn't say, “*Do not be afraid*” (some translations render it that way). He actually said, “*Stop being afraid.*”

Evidently Paul was still dealing with some fear and uncertainty about himself.

From Paul's perspective... the immediate future was perfectly predictable. Soon there would be a riot... and he would be harshly and unjustly treated. The diabolical pattern was quite clear. He was like a boxer who knows what is coming when he answers the bell.

Poor Paul was worrying about troubles he was not facing yet... a terrible habit in which we all engage.

When Lincoln was on his way to Washington to be inaugurated... he spent some time in New York with Horace Greeley and told him an anecdote which was meant to be an answer to the question which everybody was asking him: *Are we really to have Civil War?* In his circuit-riding days Lincoln and his companions... riding to the next session of court... had crossed many swollen rivers. But the Fox River was still ahead of them... and they said one to another, *"If these streams give us so much trouble, how shall we get over the Fox River?"*

When darkness fell, they stopped for the night at a log tavern, where they fell in with the Methodist presiding elder of the district who rode through the country in all kinds of weather and knew all about the Fox River. They gathered about him and asked him about the present state of the river. *"Oh yes,"* replied the circuit rider, *"I know all about the Fox River. I have crossed it often and understand it well. But I have one fixed rule with regard to the Fox River—I never cross it till I reach it."*

That is a good rule—easy to remember, not so easy to keep.

Many of us are pros at borrowing trouble. We feel harassed as we wait for something disastrous and unpleasant to happen. We just know the social event is going to be a flop. “*What if it rains on our picnic?*” ... We are sure So-And-So will put the wrong interpretation on our words. ... We put ourselves through a thousand tribulations that we are never meant to undergo—and probably never will.

Paul needed a vision. But we have Scripture to remind us of the truths Paul received in that vision.

- 1) Fear not
- 2) Keep ministering
- 3) Receive promised protection
- 4) Recognize that your work will not be in vain

It is just like our Lord to speak to us when we need Him the most. His tender "Fear not!" can calm the storm in our hearts regardless of the circumstances around us. This is the way He assured Abraham (Gen. 15:1), Isaac (Gen. 26:24), and Jacob (Gen. 46:3), as well as Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 20:15-17), Daniel (Dan. 10:12, 19), Mary (Luke 1:30), and Peter (Luke 5:10). ... As believers we can always know that He is with you!

Second... Keep ministering. Let me read a little further from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians... picking up from my previous citation into the next verse...

1 Corinthians 2:3-4 (ESV)

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

Lloyd Ogilvie writes:

I have learned this repeatedly in my own life. When my strength is depleted, when my rhetoric is unpolished by human talent, when I am weary, the Lord has a much better tool for empathetic, sensitive communication. The barriers are down. When I know I can do nothing by myself, my poverty becomes a channel of his power. More than that, often when I feel I have been least efficient, people have been helped most effectively. It has taken me a long time to learn that the lower my resistances are and the less self-consciousness I have, the more the Word of God comes through.

Weakness is the secret strength of God's most effective servants and the indispensable element of potent preaching. If you are feeling weak and fearful, praise God! Now is the time to speak and not be silent, relying on him to make his power perfect in your weakness (see 2 Cor. 12:9-10). Then whatever you do, whatever is accomplished for Christ, all the glory will go to God.

Third... Receive promised protection. No hurt would come to Paul in Corinth. ... This had not been true in previous months... for Paul had suffered terribly. ... And it would not be true in the future. ... But for a particular window of time it was true... because God had promised.

In Corinth nothing and no one could do ultimate harm to the Apostle Paul... and it is the same with us. ... God's protection does not mean we will be free from difficulties... but God will never allow us to face more than we can bear. ... Not only that... but no eternal damage can befall us.

Fourth... Recognize that your work will not be in vain. God assured his apostle, "I have many people in this city." Those were encouraging words. Paul's work would not be fruitless. Some of the Corinthians were tired of Tinsel Town. The fleshly pleasures had lost their attraction. Some were

suffering deep guilt and an awful emptiness of soul. They were ready to receive Christ.

Some of us may be discouraged and fear an uncertain future. Some of us are seeing encouraging things happen but are afraid they will not last and hard times will return. The Lord has a message for us:

"Do not be afraid. Stop borrowing trouble. Look to me! I love you. Keep ministering. Keep caring. Keep speaking my name. Inactivity will only imprison your fears. Believe that I am with you and that I will give you all the protection you need. Believe that your life will bear fruit—I promise."

Acts 18:11-17

More opposition came Paul's way. Opposition to God's servant and program never stops completely... it simply lays low for awhile and then comes back hitting hard. **But God will always see us through!** This latest opposition in Corinth involved a court appearance in Corinth by Paul.

Gallio's unconcern sounds as if he were harsh and cold. But it is clear from other references to Gallio in Roman history that he was a very good man. He was generous, kindhearted, and thoughtful. Probably what Luke meant was that he was fair-minded, that he didn't take sides easily, do deals, or pervert justice. He was a good, honorable judge who didn't have an axe to grind.

This was another gift that God gave to Paul. ... He had been before bad judges in previous settings where mobs had been allowed to get out of control. ... In this case the Lord let him come before an honest judge.

Paul was prepared to defend himself... but this turned out to be unnecessary because Gallio defended Paul! ... The proconsul immediately saw that the real issue was not the application of the Roman law but the interpretation of the Jewish religion, so he refused to try the case!

Finally... even Sosthenes' getting beaten up may have encouraged Paul. Crispus had been the leader of the synagogue.... He converted to Christ... so they had to choose a new leader... Sosthenes. ... As the new leader... he led the united charge and presented the case against Paul before Gallio.

The other members of the synagogue were angered that he did such a bad job... and beat him up. ...(Paul was used to being the one who got the beating after a public trial. This time his false accuser was the recipient.)

But this is not what I think would have encouraged Paul. It was what happened to Sosthenes (after this) and perhaps because of this... that must have been a great lift to Paul.

Listen to the opening verse of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians...

1 Corinthians 1:1

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

Sosthenes' getting beaten up by the synagogue members had evidently led to *his* coming to faith in Christ.

Paul went where God had called him to go... even though he didn't know how any care for him would be offered. He went to Corinth with his shoulders slumped...financially destitute and needing a job... and

completely alone. ... But he didn't fail to go. ... And once he arrived in the city... he realized that the Lord was there ahead of him and had a home for him to stay in... people to care for him... and a variety of other encouragements.

The way we grow in faith is to trust God when He is not evident... when we don't know the answers ahead of time... when we are going into circumstances from which we can't see how any good can come.

We walk by faith, not by sight. ... We gain faith by trusting God when we can't see... by moving forward even when it is difficult... by assuming God will be there... even though there is no measurable evidence that He is there now.

I am going to close now with the following words... which are from a letter written by Paul to the Corinthian church sometime later... about being sure of things that are invisible:

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (ESV)

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.