

# Acts

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)*

## **Seasons of Adversity**

**January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

**Acts 18:9-23**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning, Redeemer! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 18.

We took a break from our series in Acts for a little over a month as we celebrated advent, so we are going to need to spend some time reorienting ourselves within this story. In Acts 1:8, we find what some have called the “table of contents” for this book. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus gathered his disciples and said:

you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And we did receive power. At Pentecost, the church received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, and we were equipped to minister as the body of Christ in the world. And the church bore witness to Jesus in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria. At this stage in the book of Acts, the church is beginning her ministry to the end of the earth. Ethnic barriers are being crossed. Language barriers are being overcome. The church is growing like never before!

The most notable missionary in the book of Acts is a man by the name of Paul. We learned about his transformation in chapter 9. He was a man who formerly hated Jesus. He had watched with joy as Christians were stoned to death. He had spearheaded a mission to travel to neighbouring cities to seek out and arrest the followers of Jesus. But, when Jesus revealed himself to Paul and opened

his eyes to see the good news, Paul became the most ambitious and relentless missionary that this world has ever seen.

We have been following him in his missionary work ever since chapter 13 and it has been remarkable! Paul was fearless, and tireless, and seemingly unstoppable! But that brings us to our passage for this morning. Here, in chapter 18, we are reminded that even though Paul was wildly driven, he was just a man like us. He had his own struggles and, as Paul ministered in Corinth, there was a battle going on behind the scenes.

We catch a glimpse into this inner turmoil in Paul's letter to these same Corinthians. Listen to the way that Paul recounts his time with these believers. In 1 Corinthians 2:3, we read:

And I was with you **in weakness and in fear and much trembling** (1 Corinthians 2:3  
ESV)

Sometimes the years and years of pressing forward and pushing through finally take their toll on a person. Even the people that you revere and respect – even Apostles – sometimes find themselves under the dark clouds of discouragement. I think that's what we see here in the Apostle Paul.

He was stoned and left for dead at Lystra. Then he was imprisoned in Philippi. Then he was chased out of Thessalonica, and then again out of Berea. And then – having been forced away from his friends – he took on a solo ministry in Athens where he preached every day to people who referred to him as a “babblers.” As one commentator observes:

So he must've travelled from Athens to Corinth in a dejected mood, wondering what worse could happen and why God had allowed matters to fall out so badly.<sup>1</sup>

That's where we're at in the story. Here we find the Apostle Paul feeling a bit beaten down and yet ministering faithfully in the city of Corinth. Look with me now to Acts 18. We're going to be reading verses 9-23. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, <sup>10</sup> for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have

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<sup>1</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 479.

many in this city who are my people.”<sup>11</sup> And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

<sup>12</sup> But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal,<sup>13</sup> saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.”<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> And he drove them from the tribunal.<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.<sup>19</sup> And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.<sup>20</sup> When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined.<sup>21</sup> But on taking leave of them he said, “I will return to you if God wills,” and he set sail from Ephesus.

<sup>22</sup> When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch.<sup>23</sup> After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. (Acts 18:9-23 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

If you were with us when we preached our last sermon in Acts (and if you have a good memory) then you likely notice that we are covering some ground for a second time. The last time that we looked at this passage we zoomed in on verses 9-12 and we spent our time unpacking and applying Jesus’ message to Paul.

If you weren’t here with us that week, then you can go back on the website to get caught up. I’m not going to preach that sermon again today but instead I want to draw some general lessons from Paul’s difficult season in Corinth.

Paul was discouraged. And we see here that his discouragement wasn’t unfounded. There *was* a group that was plotting against Paul behind the scenes. An attack *was* imminent. The feeling of dread that Paul was wrestling through was legitimate.

And yet, as we look back on Paul's time in Corinth with the privilege of hindsight, we can see all the ways that God was working. Paul couldn't see it at the time. None of us can when we are living through it. But there are valuable lessons in this story. To that end, we're going to ask and answer one simple question of our passage this morning.

## What Can We Learn From Paul's Season Of Adversity?

First, we learn in this passage that:

### 1. Seasons of adversity do not disqualify us from service

Remember, Paul wrote to the Corinthians after the fact and confessed:

I was with you **in weakness and in fear and much trembling** (1 Corinthians 2:3 ESV)

Paul's time in Corinth was a time when he was admittedly not at his best. Between the physical weakness, the relational losses, and the ministry setbacks, Paul had been laid low.

Have you ever lived through a season of adversity? Has there been a time when all you could see in yourself was weakness and fear? It's hard to feel like you have much of a purpose when you're in the valley. We can hear the enemy telling us: "You're not fit for service. Look at you! You're afraid! You're a failure! Jesus deserves better than people like you." And that voice sounds convincing when we're exhausted. In fact, the enemy is so clever, that sometimes we can even mistake that voice for the voice of Jesus.

But that's not the voice of Jesus. Look again at what Jesus says to weak and fearful Paul:

"Do not be afraid, but **go on speaking** and do not be silent, (Acts 18:9b ESV)

And we discover in verse 11 that Paul did just that:

And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. (Acts 18:11 ESV)

Paul's season of adversity did not disqualify him from service. In fact, on the contrary, it was while Paul was laid low in weakness that he found a power that he had never seen before in his ministry!

He tells us about this in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul was facing a particular difficulty which he described as his “thorn in the flesh.” Bible scholars have guessed that Paul was referring to vision problems, or depression, or persecution, but we really can’t know for certain what the “thorn” was. What we do know is that Paul tells us:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. **For when I am weak, then I am strong.** (2 Corinthians 12:8-10 ESV)

Brothers and sisters, if you have sidelined yourself from service – if you have told yourself, “I am too weak to be of any use right now” – then could I challenge you to pray about that? Are you sure that the voice that is telling you that you can’t be of service is the voice that you’re supposed to be listening to?

Listen: There ARE some things that can disqualify us from service for a season.

If you’re living in rebellion against God, that disqualifies you from service.

If you’re living in unrepentant sin, that disqualifies you from service.

If you’re living in bitterness and resentment towards the church, that disqualifies you from service.

But weakness? No, according to God’s word, weakness is actually one of the primary tools that God uses to work His power in and through us. Weakness humbles us and causes us to put our trust in God rather than in ourselves. Weakness keeps us from reading our own press or believing the flattering compliments that can come our way. In fact, A.W. Tozer argues:

It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.<sup>2</sup>

We hold this treasure in jars of clay. The cracks allow the glory of God to shine through.

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<sup>2</sup> A.W. Tozer as quoted by Colin Hansen, Jeff Robinson EDS, *12 Faithful Men*, (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2018), 17.

Seasons of adversity do not disqualify us from service. That's the first lesson that we learn in this passage, and the second is like it:

## 2. Seasons of adversity do not excuse us from obedience

Look again at verse 9:

“Do not be afraid, but **go on speaking** and do not be silent, (Acts 18:9b ESV)

In these words, we have already found a warm, restoring invitation from Jesus. But in these same words, don't we also find a firm call to action?

How many times does God command His people not to be afraid in the Scriptures? How many times has He proven His faithfulness? How many times has He led His people through impossible circumstances and brought victory out of what appeared to be certain defeat? Paul has witnessed these victories! Paul knows better than to be sidelined by his fear. And so, Jesus appears to Paul, and he *calls him to action!*

Perhaps there are some of us here today who – more than you need to hear the warm word of encouragement – need to hear the firm call to action! You need to hear Jesus' invitation to shake off the fear and apathy that has taken hold of you so that you can reengage with your assignment.

Sometimes, when we find ourselves in the valley, it can be easy to give ourselves a “pass” for ministry. We convince ourselves that we're too weak, or too frail, or too frightened to be of any use. As Paul stumbled into Corinth with scars on his body and discouragements on his heart, it seems that he might have been struggling to find the will to press forward.

But Jesus wouldn't have it. He reminded Paul of his powerful presence, and then he called him forward. I have been greatly struck by a quote by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in one of his sermons. I want to read you the extensive quote in full:

What we all need is not a doctor, but a sergeant major. Here we are, as it were, slouching about the parade ground, feeling our own pulses, feeling miserable, talking about our weakness. So we say, 'I need a doctor, I need to go to the clinic, I need to see the Medical Officer.' But that is not right. What you need is to listen to the voice of the sergeant major who is there shouting out the commands of God to you – “Let not sin reign in your mortal body”. ‘Yield not your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin.’ ‘Yield yourself unto God.’ You have no business to be slouching about like that; stand on your

feet, realize who and what you are, enlisted in the army of God. ‘Present yourself.’ This is not a clinic.

The main trouble with the Christian Church today is that she is too much like a clinic, too much like a hospital; that is why the great world is going to hell outside! ‘We are all suffering’ – to quote Charles Lamb again ‘with the mumps and measles of the soul’ and feeling our own pulses and talking about ourselves, and our moods and subjective states. We have lost the concept of the army of God, and the King of righteousness in this fight against the kingdom of evil. ‘What can I do to be delivered?’ we tend to say. I answer: Look at the great campaign, look at it objectively, look at it from God’s standpoint. Forget yourself and your temporary troubles and ills for the moment: fight in the army. It is not a clinic you need; you must realize that we are in a barracks, and that we are involved in a mighty campaign.<sup>3</sup>

We may be tired, but that doesn’t mean we should abandon the great commission and spend our lives living in leisure. We may be hurt, but that doesn’t mean that we should spend our lives licking our wounds. We may be scared, but that doesn’t mean that we should spend our lives hiding from hard things. We have one life to live!

We are reminded in this story that seasons of adversity do not excuse us from obedience.

And that leads us to the third lesson that we learn in this story which is that:

### **3. Seasons of adversity should prompt desperate prayer**

Look with me at verse 18:

After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, **for he was under a vow.** (Acts 18:18 ESV)

Admittedly, when I was reading ahead and planning the sermons for this series, I wasn’t initially sure what to make of this episode. A sermon titled, “Paul gets a haircut” looks out of place on the preaching calendar. This vow that Paul made feels foreign to us, but it was not foreign to Paul and his Jewish companions. And when we understand what this vow meant, it enables us to understand how Paul equipped himself for his difficult assignment in Corinth.

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<sup>3</sup> Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Romans – An Exposition of Chapter 6 – The New Man*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 174.

Commentators agree that the vow that Paul made was likely a Nazarite vow. It was essentially a heightened form of prayer and fasting. In Numbers 6 we read:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, **to separate himself to the Lord**, <sup>3</sup>he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. <sup>4</sup>All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins.

<sup>5</sup>“All the days of his vow of separation, no razor shall touch his head. Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the Lord, he shall be holy. He shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long. (Numbers 6:1-5 ESV)

Paul knew that he was entering into a season that would require more from him than he naturally possessed. More faithfulness. More courage. More tenacity. More endurance. So, mindful that he could not move forward in his own strength, Paul made a vow to the Lord and committed himself to a time of prayer and fasting. This seemingly lasted throughout Paul’s entire ministry in Corinth because it was only after he left his nearly two years of ministry there that he ended the vow.

As we consider the way that Paul responded to *his* season of adversity, does it strike you that we often respond in exactly the opposite way? When the going gets tough, isn’t it true that our prayer life often shrivels up? That’s a scary reality because, when we are hurting, we intuitively turn to the place where we expect to find comfort. How many of us instinctively turn to food, or television, or distraction for our comfort? Paul reminds us here that – if we are going to be faithful in our seasons of adversity – there is only one place to turn. We need to learn how to pray with desperation.

In my study for this sermon, I was led to an article on the Gospel Coalition website by Pastor David Kakish. He noted – and I had never noticed this before – that fasting in the Bible always accompanies times of hardship. Meaning – fasting is not like the other spiritual disciplines like Bible reading and prayer which are practiced in *every* season. Fasting is practiced in a *particular* season – and that is the season of adversity. Aaron fasts when his son dies. The nation fasts when they fall under conviction for their sins. The exiles fast in Babylon. In the article, he explains:



In fasting, we deny the comfort often legitimately found in the good things God gives us (e.g., food or drink), and run instead to God himself for consolation. In every instance, fasting was a response to an extenuating circumstance.<sup>4</sup>

So, let me challenge you this morning. Are you in a season of adversity? Do you find that you are running to all the wrong places to try to find comfort? Perhaps – since God has allowed you to come into this difficult season – He is positioning you to learn how to pray.

Seasons of adversity should prompt desperate prayer.

But there is one last lesson that we learn in this story, and it is a lesson that we desperately need to learn. This story reminds us once again that:

#### **4. Seasons of adversity are for our good**

We've already seen from Paul's letters to the Corinthians that God used this difficult season to teach Paul some valuable lessons. And if that was the only good that came from this hardship, it would be enough. But, by God's grace, something even greater was taking place. Look again at verses 12-16:

<sup>12</sup> But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal,<sup>13</sup> saying, "This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law." <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> And he drove them from the tribunal. <sup>17</sup> 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.

In these verses, Paul is brought face to face with the thing he feared. After undergoing more than his fair share of beatings and after being chased out of city after city, Paul wasn't thrilled to be facing persecution again. But here it is.

The Jewish mob seizes him. They drag him before the tribunal and proceed to spout off slanderous accusations to the proconsul Gallio. After their barrage of accusations, Paul musters his courage and prepares to make his defence – but no defence is needed! Gallio has heard enough to declare

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<sup>4</sup> David Kakish, *Fasting Isn't For The Spiritually Elite. It's For The Hurting*. The Gospel Coalition, posted January 3, 2020. Accessed January 10, 2024. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/fasting-not-spiritually-elite-hurting/>

that this is nothing more than some infighting within the Jewish faith and that Rome has no business or interest in weighing in on the subject.

This might seem like an interesting but insignificant story that Luke has recorded, but it is HUGELY significant in the expanding mission of the early church!

In order to understand why this ruling matters, we need to understand something of the political landscape. The early church was launching out at a time when Rome was the leading world power. The Romans had the power to squash religious movements that they deemed unhelpful or destructive to Roman society. But, in order to preserve the peace, they did permit some religions to worship and proselytize in Roman territories. They were given the legal title “religion licita” or an “approved religion”. Judaism was protected under this category.

But, as this group of Jesus followers arose out of Judaism, it raised an important question: Would they continue to be protected as an “approved religion”? Or would Rome decide that this Jesus movement was a dangerous sect that needed to be opposed? Commentator Richard Longenecker says of this episode in Acts 18:

The importance of Gallio's decision was profound... As it was, Gallio's refusal to act in the matter was tantamount to the recognition of Christianity as a *religio licita*; and the decision of so eminent a Roman proconsul would carry weight wherever the issue arose again and give pause to those who might want to oppose the Christian movement.<sup>5</sup>

This ruling created **legal precedent** that would protect Christians in the days to come. It might have the appearance of being a minor, local win for Paul, but it was actually a major, global win for the church! Another commentator explains:

This was an immensely important verdict, not only because it protected the Christians in the province of Achaia from legal cases against their beliefs and against the existence of their new congregations, but also because this was the first time that a Roman official issued a legal verdict concerning the followers of Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 486.

<sup>6</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 764.

When Paul came to Corinth, he did NOT want to go through this again! But Paul didn't see what God was doing behind the scenes. Paul saw a looming *attack* but he didn't see that God was going to use that attack from the enemy to create a shield that would protect His people in the future.

By the time Paul wrote to the church in Rome he could declare with confidence:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

As we come to a close, I want to acknowledge that there are some seasons in our lives when this “comfort” can feel more like an “insult.” When you are in the middle of your season of adversity – when your marriage is falling apart, or your cancer is spreading, or your children are straying – and the young, happy pastor quotes Romans 8:28 to you, I'm sure it can feel like salt in your wound.

But – as trite as it might feel right now – I need you to hear that *this is true*. I don't pretend to know what God is doing through your pain, but I *know* that He is working! The same man who ministered in Corinth in weakness, fear and much trembling is the one who was used by God to write the precious promise of Romans 8:28. If you are in Christ, God *really does* work all things together for good.

And if you still find yourself doubting how God could possibly use your pain for good, I want to direct your attention to the cross. If you won't hear it from me, and if you can't hear it from Paul, then see it in the crucifixion. Nowhere has there ever been more evil, more hatred, more undeserved suffering than at the cross.

But all of that evil, and hatred, and undeserved suffering that was laid upon Jesus was the means by which we have been set free! When Jesus cried out “It is finished!” the devil thought that he had won! But – like the mob in our passage today – he didn't realize that he had actually put the plan in motion that would set God's people free!

Through Jesus' death, the curse has been lifted. Everyone who will repent and believe will live! In this upside-down kingdom when we lose, we win! In this kingdom, down is the way up! In this kingdom, the path to glory first passes through the cross.

So, if you find yourself this morning "in weakness, fear and much trembling," you are in good company. In fact, you're right where God wants you. Offer yourself to Him today, and just watch what he will do. Let's pray together.