



WHEN OUR SUFFERING IS TOO MUCH

SERIES: LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 18:1–22

38th Message

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Are you discouraged or despairing?

Have you ever felt that you were doing what God had called you to do—whether in a relationship, a vocation, or a ministry—and yet it turned out to be much more difficult than you could have ever imagined? Perhaps you may have wondered, if I'm indeed doing what God has called me to do, why is it so hard? This is especially true when the difficulties seem to never end. When that occurs discouragement can escalate to despair and tempt us to give up.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he explains that his coming to them was "in weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (1 Cor 2:3). Though he was directed through a vision to minister in Macedonia (Acts 16:9–10), the mission was more difficult and painful than he had expected. He was severely beaten in Philippi and raging mobs forced him to flee Thessalonica and Berea. When he arrived in Athens, he was without the support of Silas and Timothy. Though he achieved a hearing before the Areopagus, he was politely dismissed with scorn and contempt. Leaving Athens for more fertile soil, Paul trudged on for three or four days to Corinth with a heavy heart, fearful of what lay ahead and he was "almost sick with anxiety over the state of the Thessalonian converts whom he had been forced to leave with the threat of persecution hanging over them (1 Thess 2:17–3:5)."¹ When Paul arrives in Corinth, he is alone and probably short of cash. To survive, he will have to set up shop quickly in a city whose wealth, pride and pervasive immorality would have intimidated any foreigner hoping to establish work there.

Corinth's wealth was due to its strategic location on the Isthmus of Corinth, the land bridge connecting mainland Greece with the Peloponnese Peninsula to the south. It commanded both the north-south trade routes by land and the east-west trade routes by sea. John Stott elaborates,

Before the Corinthian canal was cut for three and half miles across the isthmus, there was a *diolkos* or slipway along which cargoes and even small vessels could be hauled, thus saving 200 miles of perilous navigation round the southern tip of the peninsula. In consequence, Corinth boasted two ports, Lechaem on the Corinthian Gulf to the west and Cenchrea on the Saronic Gulf to the east. "Through its two harbors Corinth straddled the isthmus with one foot planted in each sea'... So Corinth was a port city of seafarers, of maritime merchants...

[Besides their wealth] the Corinthians were a **proud** people. Their intellectual arrogance emerges clearly in Paul's correspondence with them. They were also **proud** of their city, which Julius Caesar had beautifully rebuilt in 46 B.C. They boasted of its wealth and culture, of the world-famous Isthmian games which it hosted every other year, and of its political prestige as the capital of provincial Achaia, taking precedence even over Athens...

[Though Corinth was known for their wealth and arrogance, their **trademark** was their **immorality**]. Behind the city, nearly 2,000 feet above sea level, rose the rocky eminence called the Acrocorinth. On its flat summit stood the temple of Aphrodite or Venus, the

goddess of love. A thousand female slaves served her and roamed the city's streets by night as prostitutes. The sexual promiscuity of Corinth was proverbial, so that *korinthiazomai* meant to practice immorality, and *korinthiastēs* was a synonym for a harlot. Corinth was the Vanity Fair of the Roman Empire.²

No wonder Paul confessed that his coming to them was "in weakness and fear, and with **much trembling**." Given his physical weakness, depressed state of mind and the multiple strongholds of evil that held Corinth captive, the odds of having a significant impact in this ancient Las Vegas seem remote at best. However, what occurs is nothing short of a miraculous transformation of the apostle and the establishment of a vital church in the heart of darkness. Our text is a supreme example of how God enters our human experience to encourage and restore us in the process of calling out a people for his name. In Paul's case God showered him with four "double blessings."

I. First Double Blessing: Work and Fellowship (18:1–3)

1 After 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. (Acts 18:1–3 ESV)

It wasn't long after Paul arrived in town that he met a married couple, Aquila and Priscilla, with whom he quickly developed a friendship. Aquila was a Jew born in Pontus on the southern shore of the Black Sea who had migrated to Italy. After he married Priscilla, they came to Corinth because of the edict of Emperor Claudius commanding all Jews to leave Rome. The Roman historian Suetonius writes, "As the Jews were indulging in constant riots at the instigation of *Chrestus*, he banished them from Rome."³ Many scholars think that "Chrestus" is a vague reference to Christ and that the riots were in response to the proclamation of the gospel in the synagogues of Rome. If that is the case, it is likely that Aquila and Priscilla were believers before they left Rome. The timing of their arrival was providential for Paul, as Craig Keener observes,

When Luke says that Claudius commanded Jews to "depart" (*chōrizō*) from Rome, his choice of wording probably echoes Paul's recent "departure" (*chorizo*; Luke's only other use of this verb is in 1:4) from Athens in 18:1; that is, he underlines the providential coincidence of the couple's arriving in Corinth "recently" before Paul's arrival there.⁴

Nothing soothes a weary, dejected and lonely heart like genuine fellowship. The Greeks' word for it was *koinōnia*, and it meant more than the chatting over coffee after the church service. *Koinonia* is the *sharing of life together* and all that it entails. When Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, he discovered that they shared the same faith and, as a result of their faith, they both understood what it meant to be uprooted and exiled. They also shared the same occupation of being tentmakers or, more generally, leather-workers.

Before Paul arrived in Corinth, Aquila and Priscilla had already set up shop and took Paul in either as a partner or a hired worker. Nothing deepens the bonds of friendship like working alongside a friend who is as passionate for the kingdom of God as you are. I imagine Aquila and Priscilla couldn't wait to get to work each day to converse with Paul about the Scriptures and his life as an apostle. What began as a business relationship developed into a deep and lifelong friendship. In his letter to the Romans, Paul affectionately calls Aquila and Priscilla "my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life" (Rom 16:3–4).

II. Second Double Blessing: Good News and a Generous Gift (18:4–5)

4 And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. 5 When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. (18:4–5)

Having established himself at work with his new friends, Paul returned to his missionary task of proclaiming the gospel to the Jews every Sabbath. The verbs Luke uses ("reason," "persuade") suggest that this was no easy task. To change someone's worldview takes a great deal of explaining, dialoguing, arguing back and forth, and especially staying calm and gracious when emotions boil over.

After a few weeks Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul, encouraging him not only by their presence, but also with long-awaited news from Thessalonica and an unexpected financial gift from Philippi. Paul's anxiety over his Thessalonian converts had been unbearable (1 Thess 3:1), like that of a parent waiting to hear if their son or daughter survived a car accident. Imagine Paul's relief when Timothy reported that the young converts not only survived, they remained so steadfast in their faith and in their love for Paul and one another that they "became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia" (1 Thess 1:7).

In addition to this fabulous news, the Philippian church sent a significant financial gift, which allowed Paul to "*devote himself exclusively* to preaching" (18:5 NIV) so that he would not be a burden to the Corinthians (2 Cor 9:11; 1 Thes 4:14–15). The verb *synechomai* means "to occupy someone's attention intensely, to be completely absorbed with something." It was an unexpected double blessing. Paul was not only delivered from his anxiety over his children, he was now able to completely devote himself to preaching, boldly testifying that the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures was Jesus. This shows us how important it is to build up those serving the Lord on the front lines far away with notes of encouragement and the unexpected surprise of generous financial gifts.

III. Third Double Blessing: An Open Door with New Life (18:6–8)

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. (18:6–8)

Though Paul's transformation was palpable, the response in the synagogue was what you might describe as less than enthusiastic. Actually it was brutal, for "they opposed and reviled him." The term "opposed" (*antitassō*) "has the connotation of an organized front of resistance,"⁵ and when you "revile" (or "blaspheme") another person, it

means that your emotions are so heated, that you have lost your ability to be rational. Paul "shook out his garments," as Jesus had instructed his disciples to do when a town did not receive them (Luke 10:10–11). The act symbolized the rejection of those who rejected his message and that Paul was now exempt from any further responsibility for them. He was now turning to the Gentiles.

It seems God has a wry sense of humor: Just as the synagogue door closes behind Paul as he exits, the door of the adjacent house immediately opens to receive Paul and his new converts. The new little flock is never homeless. The home belongs to a Gentile God-fearer named Titius Justus, quite a "just" solution (another touch of irony). If holding a meeting across the street was not troubling enough, among Paul's converts were Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and his entire household! That made front-page news in Corinth and it wasn't long before Titius' home was burgeoning with more worshippers than the synagogue, and they found Paul's message so convincing they wasted no time lining up to be baptized. (It is not clear whether many in Corinth believed as a result of "hearing" Paul's preaching or the news of Crispus' conversion, or perhaps both, as the participle "hearing" has no object). As Isaiah predicted, the rejection of the Jews created a wide open door to the nations, so that "[God's] salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa 49:3–6).

IV. Fourth Double Blessing: Divine Encouragement and Legal Protection (18:9–17)

A. Divine encouragement

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, 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. (18:9–11)

Though the gospel seems to be advancing unhindered in Corinth, there were still strong currents of opposition flowing beneath the surface. The enemy may be struck down, but he never goes away. If Luke has taught us anything in the book of Acts it is that, whenever the gospel is unleashed with new life, there is always a counterattack; and the greater the expression of life, the more forceful is the enemy's attack. As Paul daily carried out his ministry next door to the synagogue, he was keenly aware of the enemy's increasing displeasure, which struck fear into his heart. God literally told Paul to "stop being afraid" (v. 9). When fear remains unchecked it escalates to foreboding and dread that can paralyze us. The seriousness of the situation is confirmed by Paul's words, "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (1 Cor 2:3). Given the fact that "suffering" was part and parcel of Paul's commission ("I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name," Acts 9:15–16), and all the violence and abuse that he received in Greece, Paul's fears are well grounded. So on what basis can God say, "Stop being afraid"?

The fact that the Lord himself, and not an angel, appears to Paul in a vision is striking, because visions like this are not the norm. In this dark hour, the Lord Jesus is re-commissioning Paul for a lengthy ministry in Corinth, with the added promise of protection from harm as well as a significant harvest ("I have many in this city who are my people") The phrase, "I will be with you," is much more significant than a generic promise of God's presence. Donald Gowen has shown that in the majority of instances it is addressed to Israel's leadership when they were called to a task of insurmountable proportions, "or when setting out on an undertaking that seems very likely to fail."⁶ How gracious of God to give Paul the vision of protection and guaranteed success before the enemy could strike back. Renewed and strengthened by the

vision, Paul remained in Corinth confidently teaching the Scriptures for 18 months, knowing that God was calling out a significant number of people for his name.

B. Legal protection

12 But 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. (18:12–16)

Paul’s fears were well founded, as the Jews organized themselves as a united front to bring formal charges against Paul before Gallio, the new proconsul in Corinth. Gallio was “the younger brother of Seneca the Stoic philosopher and tutor of the youthful Nero.”⁷ The Jews brought Paul to the tribunal platform (the *bema*) and charged him with inciting people to worship God in illegal ways. N. T. Wright explains that the charges were serious, as Corinth was especially proud of the imperial cult and the large temple that was “deliberately built up so that it was higher than all the other temples in town.” The Jews escaped the sanction of paying homage to the emperor and his family by agreeing “to pray for the emperor but not to pray to him.” Though Judaism was a legal religion, the question remained whether the new Christian movement was “the fulfillment of what Israel’s God had promised,” or was it “a nonsensical heresy, a way of life which had cast off Judaism entirely?”⁸

Provisionally for Paul, it seems that Gallio did his homework and gave his ruling before Paul could even speak a word in his own defense. Gallio ruled that this was an internal matter within Judaism, not something that Roman law had jurisdiction over. Once he gave his ruling, he “drove them from the tribunal,” which indicated how upset he was at the Jews for having to take up the case, and served as a warning to never again bring this issue to his court. This was a major victory for the Christians in Achaia (central and southern Greece), allowing them to continue to spread the gospel without fear of governmental interference. As Longenecker affirms,

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.⁹

C. A Political footnote: Gallio turns a blind eye

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. (18:17)

After the verdict, the crowd at the trial grabbed Sosthenes, the new synagogue leader, and beat him in front of the tribunal steps. Gallio could have stopped the violence, but he does nothing. Luke doesn’t tell us why the crowd beat him, although violence is always imminent in a gathering mob. Some suggest that it was an expression of the anti-Semitism that was typical in the empire and that the crowd is simply following Gallio’s cue and doing what he would like to, but can’t legally do.

By including this detail, Luke is giving us an insight into the relationship between the gospel and politics. On the one hand, God can sometimes use pagan officials to advance his kingdom, but on the other hand, as Wright suggests, “Luke doesn’t want us to imagine that Gallio, or any officials, have suddenly become saints, able to do no wrong and administer an absolute justice.”¹⁰ We must be very cautious

about giving our unqualified endorsement to any political official or party, even when we think they promote some of our values. In Gallio’s case, his motives were not pure, for he was contemptuous of the Jews and his decree was simply a way to remove them from his docket once and for all.

Like the prophets of the Old Testament, the church functions as the conscience to the state. It is our responsibility to call public officials to account to rule justly and justice transcends party loyalties. We are to champion the voice of the poor and the oppressed, the unborn and the handicapped, the neglected and the abused, the foreigner and the immigrant. It would be wrong to praise Gallio for his decree, but not condemn him for turning a blind eye to the beating of Sosthenes. The real hero in the story is not Gallio, but God, who kept his promise that Paul would suffer no harm.

As a side note, if this was the Sosthenes that Paul names at the opening of his letter to the Corinthians, it may have been the love and care shown to him by the new believers after he was beaten that led to his conversion.

V. Lessons from Corinth

A. Don’t be intimidated, isolated or insulated

The success Paul had in Corinth reminds us that God will build his church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. Therefore we should never be intimidated by the darkness of the city, its pervasive immorality, pride, or its ostentation and wealth. The darkest places are where people are often the most receptive to the gospel—for one reason, the consequences of sin are real. The good news is that you don’t have to be an expert in apologetics to make inroads into such a community. God has people everywhere that he is calling to himself. All you have to do is pray and allow him lead you them.

During my sophomore year in college I was studying overseas in Florence. In between quarters we were given three weeks to travel. My plan was explore northern Europe and Scandinavia, then return home by way of Germany and Switzerland. I arrived in Amsterdam and set out to look for a youth hostel but, unfortunately, got lost and ended up in the red light district. With its charming buildings, glowing lights and large picture windows it looked as quaint as Disneyland’s Main Street, except for the fact that the young girls encased in the windows were offering a far different fantasy adventure, one that would cost you your soul.

It just so happened that I had been reading a sermon on Acts 18 and recalled God’s promise to Paul. Fearfully lost and intimidated, I prayed, “Dear God, tomorrow is Sunday and I want to worship you. You must have people in this city, where are they?” Just then I turned the corner and heard a man preaching in Dutch to a young crowd gathered there. After his message, I went up to him and told him I was a new believer. Like Lydia in Philippi, he prevailed upon me and invited me to stay in his home. Because the state church was dead, he and several others had begun a number of house churches in Amsterdam. Their teaching was biblically solid, their fellowship genuine and their prayers were a model of devotion. Their hospitality made a huge impact upon me and much to my surprise, it did not end in Amsterdam. God led me to his people in every city that I visited for the next three weeks.

B. The God of “double blessings”

Paul knew exactly what he was called to do and how difficult his calling would be, for suffering was part and parcel of his ordination (Acts 9:15-16). Part of the difficulty was that the truths of the gospel were utterly alien to both Jews and Gentiles. As Wright explains,

Every time Paul came into a new town or city and opened his mouth, he knew perfectly well that what he was saying would make no sense (1 Cor 1:22–25). As with Jesus himself, the kind of “signs” that were on offer were not the sort of thing the Jewish world was wanting or expecting. A crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms. As for the non-Jewish world—well, the suggestion that a Jew might be the new “Lord” over all other lords was bad enough, but a crucified man? Everybody knew that was the most shameful and horrible death imaginable. How could such a person then be hailed as Kyrios (“Lord”)? If the answer was that God had raised this man from the dead, that would merely convince hearers that he was indeed out of his mind...Everybody knew resurrection didn’t happen.¹¹

Paul seems to have accepted his role, knowing that he would be reviled and ridiculed, blasphemed and beaten, but through the proclamation something miraculous would occur. By the time Paul arrives in Corinth, suffering has taken its toll on the apostle, physically and psychologically. You may remember at the beginning of Paul’s journey, Paul and Barnabas had a fierce disagreement over John Mark. From Barnabas’ perspective, the man was more important than the ministry; but for Paul, the seriousness of the mission took precedence over the individual. Now we learn that, from God’s perspective, the individual is just as important as the mission. With his servant on the edge of a cliff, God unleashes immeasurable grace upon grace with not one, or two, or three, but four double blessings.

1. The gifts of work and fellowship
2. The gifts of good news and a financial gift
3. The gifts of a new home overflowing with a harvest of new believers
4. The gifts of divine encouragement and legal protection

The blessing that struck me as most significant was Jesus’ personal word to protect Paul from harm during his stay in Corinth. Jesus’ promise delivered Paul from the anxiety and fear of the enemy’s counterattack and infused him greater boldness in his preaching. Perhaps it was in response to this needed respite from attack that Paul later wrote,

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Cor 10:13)

Reading between the lines of Luke’s summary of Paul’s return to Antioch (18:18–22), we see just how appreciative Paul was for God’s protection and multiple blessings.

Return to Antioch

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. 19 And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. 20 When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. 21 But on taking leave of them he said, “I will return to you if God wills,” and he set sail from Ephesus. 22 When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. (18:18–22)

God was faithful to his word, as Paul’s ministry continued unhindered by any further attacks or legal battles. To honor God publicly for what

he had done, Paul fulfills a Nazirite vow he had taken perhaps when he had asked for God’s intervention. Longenecker explains,

That Paul cut his hair in the seaport of Cenchreae shows that he had earlier taken a Nazirite vow for a particular period of time that had now ended. Such a vow had to be fulfilled at Jerusalem, where the hair would be presented to God and sacrifices offered (cf. Num 6:1–21)... Paul was determined to return to Jerusalem to fulfill his vow by presenting his hair as a burnt offering and offering sacrifices in the temple (cf. Acts 21:26). The vow could only be fulfilled after a thirty-day period of purification in the Holy City.¹²

The magnitude of Paul’s appreciation is demonstrated in that worship (“paying his vow”) took precedence over outreach. Paul was given an open door of evangelism in Ephesus, the strategic city he had longed to evangelize, but he turns it down to pay his vows in Jerusalem. This is a rhythm we desperately need today to be spiritually healthy. It also serves as a counterbalance to the anti-Semitism in the previous scene and prevents us from assuming that Paul’s turning to the Gentiles implies that God had rejected his people. Throughout his career as an apostle, Paul passionately longed for his kinsmen to come to Christ (Rom 9:1–3) and whenever necessary he was willing to become “a Jew to the Jews, in order to win Jews” (1 Cor 9:20).

Paul knows his suffering is not over, but what God did for him in Corinth will forever be memorialized in the city where it all began—Jerusalem. Paul’s example stirs me to the core, causing me to examine if I have given my Lord the appreciation that is due him for his immeasurable grace.

I will give thanks to you, O LORD, among the peoples;

I will sing praises to you among the nations.

For your steadfast love is great to the heavens,

your faithfulness to the clouds. (Ps 57:9–10)

1. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebel and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), paragraph 52146.

2. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 293–96.

3. *Life of Claudius* xxv. 4, quoted by F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 368.

4. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3:2697.

5. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP5 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 323.

6. Donald E. Gowen, *Theology in Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 65.

7. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 299.

8. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two, Chapters 13–28* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 102.

9. Longenecker, *Acts*, paragraph 52172.

10. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 103.

11. N. T. Wright, *Paul, A Biography* (New York, HarperOne, 2018), 213–14.

12. Longenecker, *Acts*, paragraph 52179.