

Ministers of Encouragement

Acts 18:1-17

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Father, ministry can often be discouraging when we experience long seasons of difficulty after difficulty and setback after setback. We thank you, Lord God, for our Savior who never wavered but, because he saw the joy that was to come, completed the task that was set before Him. He endured the cross and scorned its shame so that we may walk in His footsteps and that we may find grace, mercy, and joy in times of struggling and even stumbling. Father, renew and rejuvenate us this morning as we consider the Apostle Paul's struggles in life and ministry.

To begin our time this morning, I want to read a passage from Zack Eswine's book on the 19th-century pastor Charles Spurgeon. Eswine wrote a wonderful little book called *Spurgeon's Sorrow: Realistic Hope for Those Who Suffer from Depression*. Charles Spurgeon is considered the greatest preacher of the 19th century and had a worldwide ministry based in The Metropolitan Baptist Church in London, England. Yet, for all of his popularity, Spurgeon struggled with deep depression due to a variety of circumstances. Eswine did a deep dive into Spurgeon's depression, and this is what he learned:

In [his] tug of war with God and depression, Charles [Spurgeon] recognized a spiritual reality to depression. He felt that depression itself has circumstantial, biological, and spiritual contributors and challenges. But he also saw that the spiritual side of things could originate its own kind of depression. In other words, someone with biological depression will [still] have spiritual realities to contend with [in life]. But a person might suffer from spiritual depression even though they've had no circumstantial or biological depression to speak of [as well].

John Bunyan's famed story Pilgrim's Progress gave language to [Spurgeon] as he tried to help those who suffered (as well as describe what could assail him as well). In Bunyan's story, the main character named Christian falls into the Slough of Despond, is later captured by [the] Giant Despair, and then beaten mercilessly in Doubting Castle. [Spurgeon learned that] Despondency, despair, and doubt join together to create spiritual miseries in our lives.¹

Eswine's observations of Spurgeon and Bunyan's character Christian are spot on, and they describe many Christians' experiences in life as well as many pastors' and ministers' experiences with discouragement and depression.

There was a meme circulating on social media a few years ago of a pastor sitting at his desk working. He was a really old fella with lots of wrinkles and missing a few teeth. He looked like he had been through the wringer. The caption of the meme said, "*Who said ministry is tough? I'm thirty-five, and I feel great.*"

Do you ever feel like life and ministry as a follower of Christ has beaten you up? Have years of being in the trenches with other Christians left you feeling discouraged and perhaps depressed?

¹ Zack Eswine, *Spurgeon's Sorrows: Realistic Hope for those who Suffer from Depression*, 44.

Sometimes life and ministry or perhaps a “life-of-ministry” can leave us, as I often jokingly say, “*Feeling like nine miles of bad road*” or “*Like a poor old horse that has been ridden hard and put up wet.*”

Friends, here is what I think we are looking at in Acts 18:1-17. By the time the Apostle Paul gets to Corinth, *it seems like he has been ridden hard and put up wet.*

I want to reflect on the long hard road of ministry that has taken a toll on the Apostle Paul. It seems like the hard road of ministry was catching up with him and wearing him down. Yet, in the middle of all of this discouragement, the Lord was faithful to bring refreshment in a variety of ways. Here is our main point: *God is faithful, and He will provide encouragement in our days and seasons of discouragement in life and ministry.*

I want us to think back through what the Apostle Paul had been through since he began his ministry as an apostle. In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas set off on their first mission trip. They left their home church in Antioch in Syria. They got on a ship and sailed to Cyprus. They preached over the whole island. The proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, wanted to hear them, but Elymas, the magician, opposed it. Paul confronted him and cursed him with blindness because of his opposition to the gospel. Then they set off to Antioch in Pisidia. They preached in the synagogue. Some of the Jews believed, but others rejected the gospel and eventually attacked them. This was going to become a pattern in his ministry.

Then in Acts 14, they go to Iconium. Again, they went to the synagogue and preached the gospel. Some of the Jews accepted Jesus, but others rejected the gospel and attacked Paul by attempting to stone him.

After that, they went to Lystra and preached to the Gentiles. The people thought Paul and Barnabas were Greek gods and tried to sacrifice to them. Paul had stopped them. Then the Jews from Iconium and Antioch showed up and stirred up the crowd to the point where they stoned Paul, took him outside the city, and left him for dead. But he was not dead. He got up, and they went back into the city, and he kept on preaching. Then they traveled back through the cities where they had previously preached and strengthened the churches.

Then in Acts 15, there was the Gentile controversy over circumcision and law-keeping. Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem, where they formed a council and debated the believing Pharisees who wanted the Gentiles to convert to Judaism as a part of their conversion. The council rejected the Pharisees’ doctrine and sent Paul and Barnabas back to the new churches with a letter explaining the doctrinal implications of the New Covenant for Gentile converts.

However, before they could leave, Paul and Barnabas had an argument over taking John Mark with them. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted ways.

In Acts 16, Paul takes Silas with him, and he soon adds Timothy to the team. They headed through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia. He wanted to go to Bithynia but was given a vision of the man from Macedonian who wanted them to come to them. So, they crossed over to Macedonia and made their way to Philippi, where they met Lydia, and the Lord saved her.

Soon after that, Paul cast a demon out of the young girl who was annoying him. This young girl was being used for divination by her owners. The owners were angry with Paul because they could no longer use her to make money. So, they dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrate and attacked them. They threw them in prison, but while in the darkness of prison, Paul and Silas began to sing the praises of God, and then the Lord sent an earthquake that rocked the jail and freed them from their chains.

As a result, the jailer was so stunned by the events that he and his family listened to the gospel message and were saved. Next, the magistrate found out that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, and they had mistreated them without a trial. So, they tried to send them quietly out of the city. Paul and Silas would have none of that. They demanded that they publicly apologize by escorting them out of the city.

Finally, in Acts 17, they made their way to Thessalonica. They went to the synagogue and preached the gospel. Some accepted that Jesus was the Messiah, while others rejected the gospel, and then they were once again attacked.

Then they left Thessalonica and traveled to Berea, where they went to the synagogue and preached the gospel. Again, some accepted Christ, but others wanted to study to see if what they were saying was true. In the meantime, the Jews from Thessalonica showed up and stirred up a mob that attacked Paul. He had to leave the city, and so he went to Athens.

When he got to Athens, he saw the paganism and lostness of the city, and he was very deeply disturbed. He preached the gospel, and some accepted Jesus, but for the most part, they thought he was crazy and just ignored him. So, he left Athens and walked 50 miles west to Corinth.

As we recount Paul's mission work, we can see he has been through a lot. By the time he got to Corinth, he had lost Barnabas, his best friend, his partner in ministry, and his spiritual mentor, and it was not an amicable separation. In addition to that, he had been constantly rejected, stoned, beaten, and thrown in jail. All of this had to take a toll on his physical, emotional, mental and spiritual life. Can you see why he might be discouraged and on the verge of depression?

Paul was like the Old Testament prophet Elijah. He had been under excruciating tension for a long time. He was probably losing his ability to recover from the stress. Also, he most likely did not have enough time to physically heal from all of the beatings he had received. Now, he faced the depressing moral culture of Corinth. Corinth was a city known for its sexual immorality and corruption.

When we read his first letter to the Corinthians, we hear him talk about his struggles when he was with them. Listen to 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 . . . I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.

It seems that in Acts 18:1-17, Paul was dangerously close to becoming discouraged and depressed in ministry. He was a man who had been through the wringer, and he needed encouragement.

I want to point you to three gifts of encouragement the Lord Jesus gave Paul and that He gives us to encourage us to persevere in difficulties and trials of life and ministry.

1. Encouragement comes from partners in ministry (vv. 1-5a)

When the Apostle Paul arrived in Corinth, an encouraging thing happened to him. He met Priscilla and Aquila, and he began to meet with them and even work with them. Look in vv. 1-3:

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.

These three became fast friends. Priscilla and Aquila eventually travel with Paul on some of his mission trips. Priscilla and Aquila were in Corinth because of the anti-Semitic fervor that had been stirred up in Rome. The Roman Emperor Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome, and so Priscilla and Aquila moved their business to Corinth, where they met Paul.

Here is what we know about Priscilla and Aquila. They were already Christians. Aquila's name means eagle. Priscilla's name is the diminutive form of Prisca. Prisca was one of the great families of Rome. Most likely, she was related to this family in some way. Whatever the connection, we know she was a very gifted woman. In over half of the occurrences of their names, she is mentioned first, which is highly unusual.²

² R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word Series: Acts*, 238.

We also learn that they were tentmakers by trade. Most likely, they made tents but also worked with all kinds of leather goods. So, Paul, Pricilla, and Aquila formed a team and began to work together as tent makers and also in gospel ministry. Then not long after that, Silas and Timothy arrived, and they formed a solid ministry team.

Brothers and sisters, partners in ministry help us deal with the experience of discouragement and depression in ministry. Partners help us with the suffering and trials that come with ministry as well. It is comforting to know that you can sit down with a friend in ministry and pray together. It is comforting that he or she will encourage you to keep going or even exhort you to keep going. A partner in ministry is someone you can pour out all of the pain you have experienced in life and ministry and find encouragement. A partner in ministry will help you shoulder the load of pain and suffering you have experienced. They may even step in to bear the weight of ministry for you for a season. Bottom line: a partner in ministry will keep pointing you to Jesus.

I cannot express in adequate words what it means to be in ministry here at Grand with Pastor Eric and our elders. These men are partners in ministry that encourage me and pray for me. We share each other's loads and bear one another's burdens. When one is weak, the others step in to bear up under the weight of ministry. This is very encouraging.

Finally, partners in ministry can be financial supporters too. Those who go into full-time ministry need the support of partners in ministry.

Not all who go into ministry are self-supported like Paul, Pricilla, and Aquila were as tent-makers. Not every pastor or missionary can support their own ministry. Some are called to be what we call bi-vocational. They work part-time and minister part-time (actually, most do ministry full-time). Some receive full-time support from the church. This is what we do here by having two vocational pastors. Grand also supports local ministers and those we have sent overseas. Bottom line: Financial partners are a great encouragement to those who are in ministry.

2. Encouragement comes from seeing sinners saved (vv. 5b-8)

Look again at the last part of v. 5:

Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

The encouragement Paul received from his partners in ministry allowed him to keep preaching the word. The Greek word for *occupied* can also mean *to be taken captive*. In other words, the Apostle Paul was so encouraged that he was able to keep on preaching the gospel even in the face of opposition.

Look at v. 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."

Those who listened to him not only rejected it, they reviled him to the point where he called down a curse on them. He and Barnabas had done that back in Acts 13:51 when the Jews rejected the gospel.

The Apostle Paul used a curse and warning from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. Paul was like the *Watchman on the Wall*. He had done his part by preaching the gospel to them, and because they had rejected the gospel, they were in danger of spending eternity in Hell or, as the warning said, *"Your blood be on your own heads!"*

So, Paul goes to Titius Justus, whose house was next door to the synagogue, to preach and teach. Look in vv. 7-8:

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.

As a result, Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and his whole household believed the gospel and were baptized. Also, many of the Corinthians became Christians.

Friends, when one door closes, go next door and see what God will do. There may be a Crispus next door who is seeking Jesus. We never know but what I do know is that when it seems like all doors are closed, the Lord opens doors you may never have dreamed of being open, and God saves sinners. *There is nothing more encouraging than seeing people come to faith in Jesus.*

3. Encouragement comes from God's faithful promises (vv. 9-18)

Now by the time we get to this part of the story, Paul may have been encouraged, but he was probably waiting for the other shoe to drop. It is at this point that he is usually arrested and attacked. It was when people began to get saved and follow Jesus that the enemy fought hard against Paul and his mission team. It is no different for us. When people begin to be discipled and get saved, the enemy will fight hard against the work of the gospel, a local church, and the members of that church who share it, teach it, and preach it.

But notice what the Lord does to encourage Paul. He gave him a vision in the night. Look at vv. 9-10:

Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent,¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.

The Lord Jesus gave Paul a four-part promise in vv. 9-10 to encourage him to persevere in his work. Let's break down this promise.

First, Jesus called Paul to *Fear Not!* Notice what Jesus says,

"Do not be afraid."

Although he had been experiencing success in ministry, he had still given in to fear. Remember what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 2:3:

"And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling."

So, Jesus gave Paul a gentle rebuke to restore and renew him in his work when He said to him,

"Do not be afraid."

In his commentary on Acts, Pastor Kent Hughes says:

The vision and its opening words—the fact that God made an effort to encourage Paul not to fear—meant that God loved and cared for his ambassador. The assurance ministered to Paul's heart, just as 1 John 4:18 teaches us: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." The simple words in the vision filled Paul's heart with God's love, and fear was put to flight. Time and time again the Scriptures tell us to fear not—stop worrying about tomorrow, to stop borrowing trouble—because we are divinely loved, and God's love is enough!³

Part of what God may do to encourage you may begin with a gentle rebuke to stop giving in to fear.

I can remember a time of discouragement and depression in ministry, and the Lord just didn't give me all words of comfort to encourage me. I had fallen into a cycle of fear and seeking the approval of others. The first

³ Ibid, 241.

thing the Lord did was to rebuke me. I saw that I needed to stop seeking the approval of others and only be concerned with His approval. After I had repented of my sin, I was able to receive the fullness of His love and encouragement.

The second promise was for *Paul to fulfill his calling*. Notice what Jesus said:

“Go on speaking and do not be silent.”

Apparently, Paul’s fear had made him afraid to speak. After all, anytime he spoke, he was rejected and then attacked. It only makes sense that he might think that if he keeps on preaching, he would be rejected, arrested, attacked, and thrown in prison. That was the pattern of his ministry up to this point.

What Paul didn’t realize was that fear had already imprisoned him. The Lord Jesus wanted to set him free by calling him to remember his calling and, in boldness, fulfill that calling.

Brothers and sisters, has a fear of sharing the gospel ever imprisoned you? It is actually a common experience for Christians to be concerned with being rejected for sharing the gospel. We most likely will not be beaten and arrested here in the states, but we will at times be rejected by friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers. To be rejected is a hard thing to experience, but Jesus knows that if we give in to that fear, we will put ourselves in prison.

The key to being set free is to look to the One who was rejected for us, nailed to the cross, and for the joy set before Him died in our place and for our sin. Jesus didn’t let fear keep Him from going to the cross, but He endured the cross knowing His resurrection was the victory over fear.

By the way, the boldness Jesus calls us to is not the boldness we manufacture. It comes to us from the Holy Spirit. When we are at our weakest and lowest point, the promise found in the gospel is the key that unlocks the prison doors and sets us free.

The third promise is in the first part of v. 10:

“For I am with you.”

When you hear this promise, it really is all we need to hear, isn’t it? Paul was being reminded of Jesus’ words given in the Great Commission:

“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Just to know and be reminded that Jesus is with you is such a precious promise. But it is not only Jesus that is with us, but we have a Trinitarian God. Our Heavenly Father and His Holy Spirit are with us as well. We have the fullness of the God-head dwelling in us and with us as we speak, make disciples, and share the gospel with our family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. This is an amazing truth that we can meditate on while we are in our weakened condition. *Be encouraged—our God is with us.*

The last promise says:

“No one will attack you to harm you.”

Paul needed to hear that God was going to protect him. This part of the promise was just for Paul at a very specific time. Paul knew this, and we need to remember it. Paul had previously said that through much tribulation, we would enter the kingdom of heaven. So, Paul knew this promise was only for this point in time.

God never promises we will not suffer or even be killed for our faith in Christ or for our work in gospel ministry. However, the Lord Jesus wanted Paul to know that he would not be attacked in Corinth.

The interesting thing about this promise is that as you keep reading, it looked like he was going to be attacked. He was arrested and taken before the proconsul Gallio. Then just as Paul was about to open his mouth and speak in his defense, Gallio stopped him. He was not going to hear the charges made against Paul or Paul’s

defense. The Jews were so angry with the outcome that they didn't attack Paul, but instead, they attacked the new ruler of the synagogue, Sosthenes.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, whether you are arrested or attacked for making disciples or sharing the gospel, be encouraged—Jesus is with you. If you are in Christ, you are free indeed. Hold fast to the promises of God in Christ. He will never leave you or forsake you.

Let me say this as we close our time together. We must remember the promises of God. We must recognize the ways the Lord Jesus is encouraging us. Nevertheless, I know seasons of discouragement and even depression will flood our souls.

If you are like me, you often wonder what the Lord's plans are for you when seasons of discouragement and depression settle in your heart and mind and leave us wounded. Mark Buchanan, in his book, *Your God is Too Safe*, says:

The gift of wounds—[it's] Jacob's limp that at last sets him steady on his feet. It's many times the broken who break free . . . A heartache or hardship ruptures the earth beneath them, and they leave that place . . . to pursue and embrace the God who isn't safe, but who [is] good.

Brothers and sisters, we may never know all of God's purposes in our discouragement and depression in life and ministry. We know they come and . . . sadly, sometimes they come from friends and at other times from the hands of those who oppose the gospel. Nevertheless, they come, and when they come, we must hold to the promise that Jesus is with us. Buchanan goes on to say:

The wounds we inflict and the wounds inflicted on us find their mark, literally find their mark, in Christ. "See the marks on my hands. Put your hand there." The wounds we give and receive are gathered into the wounds He took. "By his wounds," Isaiah says, "we are healed." By His wounds. We gave those wounds. We lunged spear, brandished the hammer, lashed the whip, pressed down the thorns. We did it. By the very wounds we inflicted, we are healed.

And I realized also that the wounds we take are wounds He shares in, and [He] gives ultimate meaning to [them]. In our woundedness, we "fill up in [our] flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24). In our woundedness, "the sufferings of Christ, our comfort outflows" (2 Corinthians 1:5). In our woundedness, "we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body," and though "outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:10, 16). These wounds are a way of knowing the one who was "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering" (Isaiah 53:3). Wounds are one of God's deepest forms of intimacy [with us].⁴

Prayer:

O God, help us not to turn aside because of fear but rather to have courage through the Holy Spirit. Help us to keep serving, fighting, hoping, proclaiming, no matter what the obstacles the enemy might put in our way. Help us to recognize and claim the protection you have provided, knowing that whatever happens to us, no real harm can

⁴ Mark Buchanan, *Your God is Too Safe: Rediscovering the Wonder of a God You Can't Control*, 158-159.

befall us, for we are shielded by your eternal love and faithfulness. Help us remember that what we do for you will indeed bear fruit for your glory and exaltation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Blessing:

The Lord will protect you from all harm;

He will protect your life.

The Lord will protect you coming and your going

Both now and forever more.