

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

## Too Soon to Quit Acts 18:1-11

**Intro:** Ch18 describes Paul's ministry in the Greek city of Corinth. As we read through our text, we can see that this ministry began much like all the others we have seen in previous chapters but there is one significant difference. As Paul experiences the normal back-and-forth of sharing the gospel in a pagan city, God comes to him at night in a vision and speaks words of encouragement. So far in the record of Paul's missionary endeavors, this is a first! Now, Jesus has already appeared to Paul when he was on the road to Damascus (9:1-6) and would appear to him again in the temple to warn him of imminent danger (22:17-18). He'll be encouraged by the Lord again while imprisoned in Jerusalem (23:11) and later when on trial in Rome (2 Tim 4:16-17). An angel from God would also appear to Paul, traveling to Rome on a ship in the middle of a storm to assure the safety of the passengers and crew (27:23-25).

As we look at each of these instances, we notice that all of them occur during times of great danger, the first being the most dangerous of all. I think Paul was either going to make it to Damascus as a born-again believer or he wasn't going to make it there at all! So, if the pattern of divine appearance points to times of danger, what was the danger for Paul in Corinth? Could it be that after all Paul had faced through the course of his ministry to the early church and, more specifically, through his missionary efforts to the Gentiles, that he has finally become discouraged enough to pack it in and go home? I hate to besmirch the reputation of the greatest missionary evangelist the church has ever seen but Paul was still human. His body, spirit and psyche could only take so much abuse. Clearly, something was up or the Lord wouldn't have needed to come to him in a vision with encouragement.

The story is told of a man shoveling snow from his driveway when 2 boys carrying snow shovels came up and said, "We'll shovel your snow, Mister. Only \$2!" Puzzled, the man replied, "Can't you see I'm doing it myself?" "Sure!" said one of the boys, "that's why we asked. We get most of our business from people who are half-way through and feel like quitting!" What was Paul's frame of mind as he entered Corinth? Was he discouraged?

Was he considering quitting? Not much is said about this in Acts but if we look at what happened in the days and weeks leading up to his arrival and what he experienced while he ministered in Corinth, we can see that he was probably very discouraged.

First off, Paul had been having as rough a time on his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey as he had had on his 1<sup>st</sup>. He'd been opposed virtually everywhere he went and instead of decreasing, the opposition was actually increasing. Sure, he had been stoned and left for dead during his first trip but God had miraculously healed him or raised him from the dead at that time. On this trip, he was illegally flogged and falsely imprisoned in Philippi. It's possible he still suffered from the wounds of this encounter, carrying the pain of it with him to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and now Corinth.

How would we have handled this kind of abuse? Do you think it would have brought a measure of discouragement? I'd venture to say not because as soon as they saw them picking up rocks the modern, western Christian would say, "I don't think so! I'm outta here!" Right? We'd say, "Who needs this? I had a perfectly good life in Jerusalem. I'm trying to serve Jesus. He said He would always be with me but I'm the one being abused, hounded from city to city, stoned, beaten, and imprisoned. I don't need this." I doubt Paul said that or even thought it. But, all the abuse had to have an effect on him personally.

Consider his last attempt at ministry in Athens. Paul had been deeply affected by the widespread idolatry in Athens and worked tirelessly to remedy it. When given an opportunity to speak to the intellectuals of the city, his message was a marvelous example of sharp communication. It revealed Paul's extraordinary ability to adapt the message of the gospel to any situation. His educational training and spiritual acumen produced a brilliant address...but it was cut short by scoffers and the spiritual results of his ministry in Athens appeared to be meager. Sure, it's impossible to accurately measure the true impact of one message but it's likely Paul was disappointed with his experience in Athens.

Now Paul was entering Corinth, a city infamous in the ancient world. Corinth was a large city; it was the capitol of the province of Achaia and a rival city to Athens. While Athens was known for its architecture, art and philosophy; Corinth was known for something else. For one thing, it was a cosmopolitan

city. This was true of many Roman cities but none more than Corinth. The city had a tremendous mixture of peoples because it was a busy seaport and its work was commerce. So, people came there from all over the Roman Empire. 2<sup>nd</sup>, it was a commercial city. It was uniquely situated on the isthmus that joined the mainland of Greece to the north with the Peloponnesian peninsula to the south. So, not only did all overland trade pass through Corinth, so did all shipping trade in that area.

But the 1 characteristic Corinth was known for in the ancient world was its corruption. In fact, the name Corinthian was synonymous for the most perverted behavior. Corinth was a center of the cult of Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love (Venus). The temple of Aphrodite in Corinth was one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world, and at one time there were 10 thousand temple prostitutes. They did business with the sailors and other commercial people who passed through the town. If you were called a “Corinthian” in the ancient world, you’d take that as an insult. If Paul had culture shock from the idolatry of Athens, He’d have moral shock from the immorality of Corinth!

We live in a world that is not unlike Corinth. America is rightly called the melting pot of nations. We have people from every nation living and working in this country. Even in our small slice of the world, you can find people who speak a multitude of mother languages and they are all here for the same reason – commerce! We live in a materialistic, commercialized world. Not sure if Americans are unique in this but we’re the first to bemoan the commercialization of the holidays and the first to stand in line to contribute to the same! And, of course, just like Corinth, our world is overrun with immorality and corruption and it appears that it’s only getting worse. As we watch our world swirling around the drain, it’s easy to become overwhelmed by it all and become discouraged. That’s what Paul was facing.

Corinth, with its 200,000 people wouldn’t be the easiest place to start a church and yet, that’s where Paul went after leaving Athens and...he went alone! Remember, he had left his fellow laborers in Macedonia, for good reason. They had started churches there but Paul was forced to leave; he hadn’t been able to teach the new converts very long and they needed teaching. So Silas and Timothy were left to teach them. It was the right thing to do. Still, having left Silas and Timothy and gone on as he was called to do, Paul was alone. It’s hard to be alone, especially when you’re trying to do

some important work or tackle a difficult assignment. Paul must've been just a bit down because of this.

Another reason Paul was discouraged was that his finances had run out. The church in Antioch had sent them off with some support but now it was all but gone. Paul was forced to supplement his income by working in a trade. All Jewish boys were expected to learn a trade, no matter what profession they would enter. Paul had learned to make leather tents as a youth and this trade supported him in his ministry in Corinth. Of course, while he was working, he couldn't be ministering so this would have hampered his efforts to reach the city with the gospel.

Paul had other difficulties. When he went into the synagogues, he had little success. At first, he reasoned with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks there, persuading some to consider his message (4). But, when he begins to declare that Jesus is the Christ, the Jews begin to oppose him and become abusive – so much so that Paul eventually shook the dust of the synagogue out of his clothes in symbolic protest and declares he will preach just to the Gentiles. Imagine! Paul's foremost concern had always been for his own people, the Jews. He prayed earnestly for them; ministered selflessly to them; endured a lot of abuse from them. But, in spite of his prayers, in spite of his ministry, in spite of his knowledge of the Scriptures and his ability to expound them clearly, very few believed. This had to be disheartening for one who worked so hard to bring the gospel to the Jews.

If Paul hadn't had enough of an excuse to say, "I'm done with this; I am going home," he certainly had enough of an excuse to say it now. He could have said, "Not only am I rejected by my people, not only do they turn away from Christ, but they're even abusive to me. I've been through all this before. I know what it leads to and here it's starting all over again. The next thing they are going to do is stir up the Greeks against me. Then I'll be hauled into court. After that I'll probably be beaten and thrown in jail. I had enough of that at Philippi. I give up – I quit." If Paul had these fears, they weren't idle fears, because the rest of the story says this is exactly what his opponents tried to do.

Paul had ample cause to be discouraged and no doubt was, just as we have valid reasons to be discouraged today and probably are. But, here comes the good news. At this point in time, when Paul was his most discouraged,

God intervened in several important ways to bring him real encouragement.

1<sup>st</sup>, God sent Paul help. Initially, it was through meeting Aquila and Priscilla. We don't know if they were already Christians before they met Paul or became Christians through Paul's personal ministry but this began one of the important friendships of the NT. Later, Paul would call them his fellow workers who would risk their own necks for his life ([Rom 16:3-4](#)). At this point, they provided Paul a place to stay and a chance to support himself by assisting them in their business. Eventually though, Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth. There are times when you have to minister alone but Christian work is supposed to be a team effort. God knew Paul was alone and He sent him help.

When you see somebody doing a good work but who seems to be working without a lot of encouragement, do what you can to encourage or help that person. There is a sense in which anyone who is doing anything worthwhile is in a lonely position. Seek out such people. Speak a good word. One of the most encouraging things for me is to know there are people who are ready to help at a moments notice. That applies to people in this church as well as many others outside our church. Several years ago, after a storm, we had an emergency situation arise in a local community that the church wasn't able to handle. A fellow pastor called from another state asking if we needed any help. I told him about the sad situation and he said, "Our church will take care of that for you." Oftentimes, all you need is to know other people will have your back.

Next, God sent Paul finances. Luke doesn't mention this but Paul does in his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians. He said when Silas and Timothy arrived; they brought financial help sent from the churches in Macedonia. The Philippians, Thessalonians and Berean Christians knew Paul was out there alone. They knew he was running short on funds. They knew his working to support himself would take away from ministry – ministry they all had benefitted from. So they sent Paul money. Their financial help released Paul to do what he was specifically called by God to do.

No one disputes that Paul was a great Christian teacher and a great missionary evangelist but how much would he have accomplished in Corinth alone? Friends like Aquila and Priscilla, Silas and Timothy and the generous believers in Macedonia made it possible for Paul to serve the Lord

effectively. His Christian friends, new and old, encouraged him at a time when he needed it most. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “God evidently does not intend us all to be rich or powerful or great, but He does intend us all to be friends.” Paul said it this way, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” ([Gal 6:2](#)). From a human perspective, there would’ve been no church in Corinth if it wasn’t for the service and devotion to the Lord of many different people.

3<sup>rd</sup>, God blessed Paul’s ministry. Paul had been opposed so strongly that he shook off the dust and left and...went right next door! This was a smart move because it gave him continued contact with the Jews and Gentile proselytes. The result being the ruler of the synagogue was saved along with his entire household! Of course, this would have gotten him fired from his position but what a stirring testimony this must have been to the Jews of Corinth! It had been a slow start. But now the Word of God was beginning to take effect, the Holy Spirit was blessing, and people—1 here, 2 there, another 1 here—were beginning to place their faith in Jesus Christ.

Finally, God spoke to Paul. It’s just like our Lord to speak to us when we need Him the most. Each part of what God said deserves special attention. “Do not be afraid.” Was Paul afraid? He must’ve been, because God doesn’t waste words and God was telling him not to be. He must’ve been afraid of the hostility of the Jews and what might happen to him again because of it. The Lord’s “Fear not” can calm the storm in our hearts regardless of the circumstances around us. It’s how He assured Abraham ([Gen 15:1](#)), Isaac ([Gen 26:24](#)) and Jacob ([Gen 46:3](#)) as well as Daniel ([10:12, 19](#)), Mary ([Lk 1:30](#)) and Peter ([Lk 5:10](#)) and others. The next time you feel isolated and defeated, meditate on [Isa 43:1-7](#). “Yeah, but He was saying this to Israel” True, God was saying this to those who are called His people.

“Speak, and do not be silent.” Speaking was what Paul was called to do, right? How could he not keep on speaking? Obviously, he must’ve been tempted to stop. The results had been meager. But God said, “Keep speaking. Keep teaching” because God has chosen to bring sinners to Christ through the preaching and teaching of His Word. The solution to Paul’s fear was for him to obey the Lord’s command to not be afraid and to keep sharing the gospel.

“I am with you” This was a virtual repetition of what Jesus had said to the

disciples in the Great Commission, and Paul must have recognized it as such. This statement from Jesus is not just a promise – it is a certainty! No matter how alone Paul was in Corinth, he was never really alone. The Lord was always with him even if he didn't feel His presence. But, this statement doesn't just emphasize the presence of Jesus – how He dwells with us, it also points to the sympathy of Jesus for His people – how He cares for us and the cooperation of Jesus with His servants – how He works with us to accomplish His will on this earth. This promise was the basis for God's command to not be afraid and to keep on speaking. When we understand what this means and Who said it, it is enough!

“No one will attack you to hurt you.” The same kind of trouble Paul experienced in other places was brewing here too! It's in the very next passage (12-17). But, Jesus didn't tell Paul that his opponents would try to stop him, He only said they wouldn't be successful. That had to be encouraging after all the setbacks Paul had been handed by the enemy.

“I have many people in this city.” Of all the things God said in this vision, this was the most important. What people was He talking about? Not the ones Paul had already spoken, who'd already believed, because there weren't many of them. God said this looking ahead, seeing that by the preaching of the Word through Paul's ministry He would bring many people to faith in Christ. They were His people and they would stand together as a church and bear a witness in this most corrupt city. Because Paul knew that God already had people set apart for salvation, he stayed in Corinth and preached the gospel with faith and courage. Paul's responsibility was to obey the commission; God's responsibility was to save sinners.

Paul had every reason to quit and only 1 reason to stay – God wasn't finished with him. What God required of Paul is that he walk by faith and be obedient. To walk by faith means to see opportunities even in the midst of opposition. A pessimist only sees the problems; an optimist only sees the potential; but a realist sees the potential in the problems. Paul didn't close his eyes to the dangers and difficulties in Corinth; he looked at them from the divine point of view.

Walking by faith simply means obeying God's will in spite of feelings, circumstances or consequences. There's never an easy place to serve God and if you find one, chances are something is wrong! Paul even warned us

in **II Tim 3:12** “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” Francis Bacon said, “Prosperity is the blessing of the OT; adversity is the blessing of the NT.” Ultimately, Paul didn’t allow adversity to keep him from serving the Lord; he recognized it as the natural result of effective Christian service.

When is it time to quit? It is always too soon to quit! By perseverance, the snail reached the ark! (C.H. Spurgeon). 😊