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Opposition and Blessing

Acts 18:12-23

Intro: Paul has entered the city of Corinth and he is immediately met by two opposing realities. First, there is the moral corruption of the populace. We spoke about this last time but it is clearly difficult to grasp the full force of this reality from just a single anecdote (temple of Aphrodite). In truth, Paul gives a much better description of the moral situation in Corinth in the first chapter of Romans. In this passage Paul delivers a comprehensive treatise on the depravity of the human sin nature and its inevitable decline into immorality. It's significant that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in Corinth, so when you read his description of moral corruption in [Rom Ch1](#), it can certainly be taken as a mirror of what he found in Corinth. This may seem more like a deterrent for ministry, but Paul was not dissuaded by the difficulties. He recognized that the need for the gospel was just as great in Corinth as it was in any other city.

The 2nd reality Paul faced in Corinth was the determined opposition to the gospel by the Jews. Of course, this was nothing new for Paul but the degree of ferocity manifested itself almost immediately. [Vs5-6](#) says when Paul began to testify that Jesus is the Christ, the Jews in the synagogue not only opposed his message; they blasphemed as well. Clearly, that this blasphemy was directed against Jesus because Paul preached Jesus as the Messiah. But, it was Paul's response to this blasphemy that is the most illuminating.

There are 2 OT images seen in his actions: 1) to shake out one's garments was an act of judgment that said, "You have had your opportunity, but now it's over!" It's as if Paul was washing his hands of the entire situation. While, he never stopped witnessing to the Jews, Paul's focus from here on out was to evangelize the Gentiles, as he was called to do. This was *not* an act of petulance; Paul merely fulfilled the spirit of what Jesus had said in [Mt 7:6](#), "Do not give what is holy to the dogs nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet and turn and tear you in pieces." Paul strongly sensed a responsibility to preach to the Jews but when his message was rejected so completely, he wasted no time in going to the Gentiles. We must tread lightly on this principle but, when people are

determined to reject the gospel, we shouldn't invest too much time on them until the door is opened again.

2) "Your blood be upon your own heads." We understand that to have blood on your hands means that you bear the responsibility for the death of another person, whether it's by premeditation, accident or neglect. But, to have blood on your head means that you are to blame for your own judgment. You had the opportunity to be saved but you turned it down. Paul's hands were clean because he had been faithful to declare the message of the gospel. The Jews would have their own blood on their own heads because they rejected God's truth.

How devastating this must have been to the apostle Paul! His desire was to see his countrymen saved but he also knew what sort of trouble came from the determined Jewish opposition and he was preparing for the worst. But, God came to him in a vision in the night and assured him that those who opposed him would not hurt him. Notice God didn't promise that they wouldn't attack him – just that they wouldn't be successful.

Similarly, God doesn't work to remove all the inconveniences in our lives, He doesn't eliminate obstacles or execute judgment on those who come against us and oppose us. We'd like Him to, but that's not how this Christian life works. The inconveniences, the obstacles, the opposition – all these things are here because we need to draw closer to the Lord and these things compel us to do just that. Besides, just as our faith is revealed in the midst of trials so also is the wickedness of those who oppose revealed and that wickedness is seen by God and will be judged eventually.

Of these 2 realities Paul faced in Corinth, it's interesting to note that Paul's real problems didn't arise from the ranks of the immoral pagans, they came by way of the religious crowd – the ones who should have known better! This reality is still with us today! If you busy yourself with living the Christian life as Jesus intends and the Holy Spirit empowers you to, you will likely get very little blow back from the unrighteous people living around you. In fact, they may even be impressed by your dedication to your faith (secretly). No, the majority of opposition will come from the self-righteous around you – those whose faith is based on observing religious tradition, not following Scripture.

Ultimately, Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months, preaching the gospel and teaching the Word of God to those who accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. This was the longest amount of time Paul had been able to spend at any one location on either of his missionary journeys so far. He will beat that record later but for now, this is a noticeable accomplishment. In the remainder of **ch18**, Luke gives us a brief but specific account of the Jewish opposition Paul faced and then alludes to the conclusion of Paul's 2nd missionary journey and sets the stage for his exciting 3rd trip.

12-17- God had assured Paul of his safety in the city of Corinth in **vs10** and during his 18 month ministry, there must have been several occasions where this divine protection was manifested. Paul was a determined minister of the gospel and if you were determined to resist the gospel, he would get under your skin pretty quick. We know there must have been other occasions because in his description of Priscilla and Aquila in **Rom 16:4**, Paul says they risked their own necks for his life. It's presumed he's speaking of something that happened in Corinth. Luke only shares one example of divine protection that occurred during Paul's ministry in Corinth but it is a significant one.

It appears that Gallio was the new proconsul over the region of Achaia and his arrival gave the unbelieving Jews hope that Rome might declare this new Christian sect illegal. They weren't just trying to get Paul kicked out of Corinth, they were trying to stop him from ministering in the entire province. If Gallio had accepted the Jewish charge and found Paul guilty of the alleged offense, provincial governors across the Empire would've had a legal precedent and Paul's ministry would have been severely restricted everywhere. Of course, the Jews broke the law by attacking Paul and forcing him to go to court. But this wasn't the first time fanatical Jews alleged Paul was breaking the law.

Being a Roman citizen himself, Paul was quite prepared to defend himself but it turns out that he didn't need to because Gallio himself came to Paul's defense! The proconsul immediately recognized that the issue before his court was not the application of Roman law but the interpretation of the Jewish religion, so he rightly refused to try the case! He Gallio correctly understood that the government had no role in attempting to decide matters of religion, their legitimate role and purpose was to hold jurisdiction over matters of wrongdoing or wicked crime. If these Jews were trying to get Paul

and his message banned from the empire, their plan literally blew up in the faces. Gallio's refusal to act in this case was tantamount to Rome's recognition of Christianity as a legally accepted religion. Paul was now legally free to carry the message of the gospel anywhere within the Roman Empire!

But, this was not the end of the matter. As soon as Gallio ruled against the Jews, some of the Greeks attending Gallio's court saw an opportunity to exact some punishment on them. An angry crowd accosted Sosthenes and beat him severely in front of Gallio, who simply looked the other way. Too late, the Jews realized they had made a costly mistake in bringing Paul before the court because it would appear that both the crowd and the proconsul were more likely working against them than they were working for Paul. This was a flagrant display of anti-Semitism. It was Gallio's proper duty to rule in favor of Paul but it was not his duty to allow the Greeks to start beating up the Jews.

There is a possible silver lining to come out of even this ugly scene. Sosthenes was the ruler of the synagogue that brought Paul up on charges before Gallio court. He was the one who was beaten by the Greek mob. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, in the very first verse of the first chapter, Paul mentions that a brother named Sosthenes is with him. Now, it's entirely possible that there were other believers named Sosthenes in the early church but if this was a different person, why would Paul mention him to the Corinthians? Assuredly, this is the same Sosthenes who brought such determined opposition against Paul in Corinth – and now he is a Christian! It'd be interesting to hear how this came about. It's possible that his predecessor Crispus met him in his pain and helped wash his wounds, using the opportunity to show him the love of Jesus Christ. Regardless of how it happened, all we know is that the synagogue had to find yet another person to lead them!

18 – After 18 months, Paul is ready to get back to Jerusalem so he departs from Corinth but he doesn't leave alone. Paul had developed such a deep friendship and even partnership with Priscilla and Aquila that they decided to go with him on his journey back to Jerusalem and Antioch. As Paul leaves, while he is still in the seaport of Corinth, the city of Cenchrea, he has all of his hair shaved off because he had taken a vow. This vow was most likely the Nazirite vow, similar to the lifestyle Samson was supposed to live by.

The Nazirite vow was basically a promise to abstain from all products from the grapevine, to abstain from haircuts and to never come near a dead body. This vow was usually taken for a certain period of time and the purpose of it was to express a unique, personal consecration to God. Normally, the hair (which had been allowed to grow freely) was cut off at the end of the vow and offered to the Lord at a special ceremony at the temple in Jerusalem.

Paul's observance of this vow points to 2 important principles. 1) All the determined Jewish opposition that had come against Paul had not made him anti-Jewish. Paul never forgot that he was Jewish, that his Messiah was Jewish, that Christianity was birthed out of Judaism and that the OT forms and rituals could still be used for good purpose. While Paul was adamant that Jewish ceremonies and rituals must never be required of Gentiles, he saw nothing wrong with Jewish believers who still wanted to observe such ceremonies, as long as they recognized that the fulfillment of those ceremonies had been accomplished once and for all by Jesus Christ.

2) According to Jewish tradition, the Nazirite vow could only be fulfilled in Judea. Paul began his vow in Cenchrea, not Judea. Paul's willingness to take on this vow outside of the boundaries dictated by Jewish tradition indicates that he had a desire to practice a more purely Biblical observance of these Jewish rituals. Paul's concern was for the spirit of the vow, a personal consecration to the Lord. Maybe the intense immorality of Corinth made Paul want to express his dedication and separation to the Lord more than ever. The take-away here is that Paul didn't get hung up on the letter of the law of Jewish tradition over the spirit of the law in Scripture. That was the Pharisees' downfall!

19-21 – One of the curious things about God's "No" answer to some of our prayers is that the "No" is actually a "Wait." Oftentimes, we pray for something we believe we need right now, "Gotta have it or the world's going to end!" But then it seems that God says No. Of course the world doesn't end and we keep on moving forward by God's grace and later, sometimes much later, the thing God said "No" about was actually a "Wait" and He drops it right in our laps. This is exactly what happened to Paul in **vs19**. Paul finally enters Ephesus with Priscilla and Aquila. Ephesus is the capitol of the Roman province of Asia. If you recall at the beginning of Paul's 2nd missionary journey, back in **ch16**, Paul and his team had wanted to go to

Asia but the Holy Spirit forbade them to. That definitely sounds like a “No” to me! But it wasn’t, it was a “Wait!” Now, 2 years later, God allows Paul to enter the province of Asia.

Sometimes God closes a door to send us in a different direction. Paul was determined to go to Ephesus 2 years before this but God knew there were people in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth that desperately needed to hear the gospel and were primed and ready to hear it. It’s possible that some of Paul’s converts from those cities in Greece weren’t going to be around 2 years later. Maybe God was still preparing hearts in Ephesus. Whatever the reason, the timing wasn’t right and God was sovereign enough to override Paul’s otherwise perfectly good plan and Paul was submitted to the Lord enough to trust His judgment and be obedient. That’s all God expects from any of us in all the circumstances of our lives – good or bad – to simply trust Him and be obedient to His Word.

Paul arrives in Ephesus and the Holy Spirit gives him liberty to preach in this important city and great results were seen. Get this – Paul goes into the synagogue to reason with the Jews and they actually receive what he’s telling them about Jesus. In fact, they want to hear more of it...but Paul can’t stay! Any other time he would have given a pinky in order to stick around and teach receptive ears but he had a vow to keep and he was determined to keep it. This also reveals the strong, outstanding character of the apostle Paul. After facing staunch, determined resistance to the gospel from the majority of the Jews he’d encountered over the last several years, then being presented with a golden opportunity to share the truth with open hearts and hungry hearts, most people would have found an excuse to stay in Ephesus. Not Paul! He had made a vow to the Lord and he would let nothing prevent him from keeping it.

How often do we determine in our hearts that we’re going to do better at this thing called the Christian life? How many times have we promised God that we’re going to dedicate our time and attention to Him more only to allow some inconvenience or difficulty throw us off track once again? Integrity is a word we’re all familiar with but a concept we seldom hold to. Here we see that Paul was consistent in his integrity. He didn’t allow difficult trials to dissuade him from his obedience to the Lord, nor did he allow tremendous blessings to supercede his devotion to the Lord. The reception in Ephesus was a tremendous blessing but Paul retained his integrity and committed

himself to seeing his vow through to its completion. Would to God that all His children could hold to that same high level of integrity!

22-23 - Even though Paul couldn't stay in Ephesus, he was able to leave Priscilla and Aquila behind in his place to carry on the work there. Something good had been started and he wanted that work to continue with his trusted friends. But, what happens after Paul leaves Ephesus? Sure, he sails east to Caesarea but what is Luke telling us in this passage? Believe it or not, this is an abbreviated description of the conclusion of Paul's 2nd missionary journey and the beginning of his 3rd. After Paul landed in Caesarea, Luke says he went "up" and greeted the church. Which church is that? Clearly, it's the church in Jerusalem. In the Bible, when someone goes to Jerusalem, they always go up to the city because it was built on top of a mountain. If you were going to another city, you're going down to it.

This is exactly what we see in **vs22**, Paul needs to go to Jerusalem to complete his vow in the temple. While he is there, he pops in for a visit to the apostles and congregation in Jerusalem. It's only after his vow is accomplished that he goes down to his home church in Antioch. What a blessed reunion that had to have been hearing how their prayers and support aided Paul in carrying the gospel to so many different people in so many different places.

Paul spent some time in Antioch but we don't know how much. But Paul wasn't one to sit still for long. One more time, he's off on the road again to minister to those churches he had established years before. This would include churches in Tarsus, Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. Once again, we see Paul's passion for building up disciples. Although Paul was a great missionary evangelist, he wasn't just that. He was also a great teacher and disciple makers. His desire was not just to see people saved but to see disciples become established in the word of God and grow in their relationship with God. Paul knew it wasn't enough to make a strong beginning with Jesus; we must always be growing in spiritual strength. That only comes from knowing and applying God's Word to our lives.

Spiritual growth is the most important aspect of the Christian life, after salvation. Our growth directly contributes to or detracts from our ministry to the Lord and our ministry for others. The more prepared we are, the more effective we will be. But; having said that, we still can't use our lack of

knowledge as an excuse for not sharing the gospel. “I don’t know a lot!” that may be true but you know enough and you have the opportunity to learn more. Let us be as determined to build up strong disciples as the apostle Paul was and let’s just start with ourselves first! 😊