

LIVING THE DREAM

ACTS 18:1-17 SEPTEMBER 16, 2020

Thanks to *Seinfeld* the words “yada yada” have become a well-used phrase since 1997. *Seinfeld* wasn't the first to use it, but it will forever be associated with the misadventures of Jerry and his 3 friends. Characters in the episode used ‘yada yada’ to skip over various details when telling a story, usually because those details revealed things they didn't want the people around them to know. As the scenes unfold, characters are left to speculate over what those various yada yadas passed over.

In Acts 18 Luke, the writer, is relaying a new chapter in the story of Paul's work in Greece. We find him in a new city, Corinth and as the story is told Luke passes over a lot of details. As a result, there's a *lot* of speculation that goes on when studying the passage. Now, *obviously* this is written exactly the way that God wanted it written. We don't need to fret as if we're missing something essential. At the same time, if you read commentaries or sermons that deal with these verses, you're going to find all sorts of speculation. Here are a few items that aren't agreed upon:

- Why Paul left Athens and after how long.
- Whether Priscilla and Aquila were Christians before they met Paul or not.
- Whether Paul was being *bold* in the first 4 verses or cowering in fear.
- Whether Gallio was a just judge or whether he was yet another unscrupulous official.
- Whether it was Gentiles who beat Sosthenes or if it was his own Jewish countrymen.

The gaps in detail are not bad, but they leave a lot of room for interpretation. And it's surprising this story is the setup for such a significant part of Paul's ministry life and such a significant portion of the New Testament. A lot of Biblical real estate is devoted to the Corinthian church and Paul's relationship with them.

In this text we also get the sense that something is not quite right with our dear Paul. He's isolated and has run out of provisions, but it's more than that. He's discouraged. He describes how he was feeling later in 1 Corinthians 2 where he says, “I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling.” It's hard to imagine the Apostle Paul as frightened, but he was. And he was to so profound a degree that the Lord Jesus is going to come and appear to him, personally, and tell him to not be afraid, to not be silent and to not worry about being harmed.

Paul may have been feeling low, but by the grace of God he was about to make some of the most meaningful friendships of his life *and* accomplish some powerful ministry which (through his epistles) have had ongoing repercussions all over the earth for thousands of years.

Though we may wish for a few more background details, here's what we know: First, that even the strongest of Christians can fall into discouragement. But, no matter how discouraged you are, how isolated, how out of supply or frightened of what's coming you may be, you can be built back up in the grace of God, because *our Lord* has not abandoned you. And, one more thing we can be sure of from this story: No matter how bad the place or how threatening the situation, God can accomplish wonderful things, transform lives and make a difference.

So, let's get into it in verse 1.

Acts 18:1 - After this, [Paul] left Athens and went to Corinth,

We don't know why Paul left Athens. Things weren't particularly volatile when chapter 17 came to a close. But, at some point, he did. And he left alone. Corinth was a trashy city if ever there was one. It was known as a city of vice.¹ It had a pagan temple that employed 1,000 prostitutes.² Even among the heathens this was a place known for drunkenness, immorality and all sorts of poor behavior.

So this is where Paul finds himself, on his own, and, apparently out of money and food, because he has to get a job.

Acts 18:2-3 - ² where he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul came to them, ³ and since they were of the same occupation, tentmakers by trade, he stayed with them and worked.

What does it mean he "found" them? Well, again, we have to fill in the blanks ourselves a bit, but clearly he needed a job and shelter. So it's probable that he answered an ad or went to the tent shop and inquired of whether they needed an extra hand. They quickly figured out that they were both Jews and they got on well. Was this couple already Christian when Paul met them? We can't be sure. It seems like Luke would have relayed the story if Paul led them to Christ, the way he did in the case of Lydia, for example. But, what we do know is that this seemingly chance encounter was the start of one of the richest relationships of Paul's life.

Of course it wasn't chance, it was providence. There's Paul, God's servant, in a strange city, *packed* with people (at least 200,000 people lived there³), he's got no money, he's got nowhere to live and the Lord directs him to a shop where he can not only be supplied with work and shelter, but also where he'll find lifelong friends.

In the Christian life we want to develop a greater and greater openness to receive from the Lord and to be positioned by the Lord so that He can do great things like this for us. If our heads are always down, if we're always looking in, if we feed selfishness and cynicism and skepticism, it's going to make us very brittle as God tries to form and shape us. And it's going to make it very difficult for us to receive some of the wonderful gifts God would like to give us.

Now, we learn something about Paul here: He was a tentmaker. He probably made all sorts of leather goods, but tent making would've been a big part of it. Couple of things here. First of all, in our culture there's long been a divide between blue collar work and white collar work. That's not really a good thing. You look at Paul: He had a really high level education. His original plan had been to be someone who thought and studied. But, at the same time, in that culture you always learned a trade so you could support yourself. And, for you young people, I'd highly recommend that type of mentality. Particularly if you think you're going to go into the ministry or full time missions work. Don't turn your nose up at skills or trade.

But, second, this spoke to me the other day: As tentmakers, Paul and Aquila and Priscilla would be supplying product and services to all sorts of people, including Roman soldiers.⁴ We live in a time when everyone wants to boycott everyone else. We live in a time when people refuse to serve others because of their politics or values or their job, those sorts of things. Can you imagine a Roman

¹ *Ellicott's Commentary For English Readers*

² *Gill's Exposition Of The Entire Bible*

³ <https://medium.com/acts-study-guide/corinth-1d894f32e87b>

⁴ *Gill's Exposition Of The Entire Bible*

solider coming into the tent shop and Paul saying, “I REFUSE to make a tent for you, empire scum! Also, let me tell you about the Lord Jesus Christ who loves you so much He died for you!”

If you have a personal conviction from the Lord about particular products or companies that you don't want to support, that's your business. But let's not just jump onto every anger bandwagon. Be gracious. Be led. Be directed by God, not by the crowd.

Acts 18:4 - ⁴[Paul] reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade both Jews and Greeks.

We see a term like “reasoned” there and it's easy to think that it means he was giving them doctoral thesis-level lectures and intricate logic and all sorts of academic genius. But that's not what was happening at all. Here's what was happening:

1 Corinthians 2:1-2, 4-5 - When I first came to you, dear brothers and sisters, I didn't use lofty words and impressive wisdom to tell you God's secret plan. ² For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified. ... ⁴ And my message and my preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit. ⁵ I did this so you would trust not in human wisdom but in the power of God.

The most basic message that Jesus Christ, God come in the flesh, came and lived a perfect life, died on a Roman cross, then 3 days later rose again from the dead so that all who believe on Him and call on His name will receive everlasting life is *enough* to make a difference. Paul found himself in one of the wickedest cities in the world and *that* was the message. So, when we look out at notorious places, full of sin and ruined lives, what do they need? They don't need hatred from us. They need the message of the cross. The Good News of that one, magnificent 3 day weekend, where everything changed.

Acts 18:5 - ⁵When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself to preaching the word and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah.

There's nothing wrong with working a regular job. Paul proves that. But in *his* particular situation, I think we'd all agree we'd rather him be preaching theology than patching a tent. Especially because he rarely was able to stay long in one place before being attacked. So, Silas and Timothy arrive and are able to support Paul so that he could focus on the ministry. And that is a very good thing.

As Christians, we should work to financially support ministry. Not only our *own* ministries, but other individuals and organizations that are proclaiming the Gospel. Allow the Lord to direct you in that.

In Luke's description of Paul's message we notice two things: First, that (as always) it was based upon the revealed word of God. Not trend or opinion or human philosophy. What has God said in that Scripture? Second, we see there blazing off the page: Jesus is the Messiah! He was not just a wise teacher, not just a good man, not just a great example of selfless living. He is *THE* Messiah. Meaning He and He alone is King, is Savior, is *the* Anointed One. He is the Decider for your life and my life and for the whole world. Let us all bow our knees to the King of kings and acknowledge Who He really is: Messiah and Lord.

Acts 18:6 - ⁶When they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his clothes and told them, “Your blood is on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

There are two powerful realities on display here. First of all, *you* are responsible for your own spiritual health. No one can be saved for you, no one can obey God for you. Your faith is an individual relationship with God and you are responsible to respond accordingly. Second, Christians are *also* responsible to preach to the lost. Paul here is probably referencing this passage in Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 33:3-6 - ³When the watchman sees the enemy coming, he sounds the alarm to warn the people. ⁴Then if those who hear the alarm refuse to take action, it is their own fault if they die. ⁵They heard the alarm but ignored it, so the responsibility is theirs. If they had listened to the warning, they could have saved their lives. ⁶But if the watchman sees the enemy coming and doesn’t sound the alarm to warn the people, he is responsible for their captivity. They will die in their sins, but I will hold the watchman responsible for their deaths.’

That should be a sobering and stirring message for us to be about the Lord’s business when it comes to evangelism. We are *commanded* to preach and to make disciples.

While Paul’s message to these Jews seems harsh and final, we know that he still loved them. And we know that he wasn’t shutting the door on ever talking to them again. Look at the next verse.

Acts 18:7-8 - ⁷So he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. ⁸Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, along with his whole household. Many of the Corinthians, when they heard, believed and were baptized.

There’s something comical about the fact that he set up shop next door. Probably offered a lot of friendly waves from the front porch. In fact, he did more than that, he continued sharing Jesus with any of those faithful Jews who came to hear. One of them was the guy *in charge* of the synagogue!

So far we’ve seen not only the power of God’s providence, we also can see just how usable our lives can be in His hands. Our *words* can be used. Our *work* can be used. Our *financial contributions* can be used. Our *homes* can be used. God can take any aspect of your life and apply it to His purpose and that is an exciting thought. And we also learn that opposition is no reason to quit. The Jews had responded to Paul with an organized resistance, he didn’t quit, he pivoted but continued the work. Though, it seems he was having a hard time with it all. Look at verse 9.

Acts 18:9-10 - ⁹The Lord said to Paul in a night vision, “Don’t be afraid, but keep on speaking and don’t be silent. ¹⁰For I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to hurt you, because I have many people in this city.”

Why Corinth and not Athens? Why Costa Mesa and not Santa Monica? Those are questions we can’t really answer. Instead of getting into arguments about election, we’d be better used if we assumed that God has “many people” in Hanford and go out and work the field. The truth is, He *does* have many people, all around us, currently trapped in sin and guilt and lies and we are sent to courageously be a part of the liberation effort.

On the devotional level, if you're afraid tonight, facing some unknown or hard situation, take heart that even the Apostle Paul got afraid sometimes. But also take courage by holding fast to the Lord, who knows exactly how we feel and has a word for each of us, He has promises for us, He has provision for us from His limitless supplies of grace and strength. Be of good cheer.

Acts 18:11 - ¹¹He stayed there a year and a half, teaching the word of God among them.

Paul obeyed and stayed much longer there than he was usually able to. Of course we know that just because the Lord had "many people" in that city didn't mean it would be easy. The work was hard but worthwhile.

Acts 18:12-13 - ¹²While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack against Paul and brought him to the tribunal. ¹³"This man," they said, "is persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to the law."

Now, wait a minute, didn't Jesus say "no one will lay a hand on you?" What gives? Did that promise *expire* after 18 months? Do you ever wonder if God's promises *really* apply to you? Now, sometimes Christians take Biblical promises for themselves that don't belong to them. Promises to Israel, for example. So, we want to be careful students of the Bible and be sure we understand what is and isn't promised to us. But, when God has promised, it is sure and true. Thanks to Jesus, all God's promises to us are Yes and Amen! Paul *wouldn't* be hurt in this but that doesn't mean there was no opposition. In this case, there was an official trial before a Roman official, Gallio.

Acts 18:14-17 - ¹⁴As Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or of a serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you Jews. ¹⁵But if these are questions about words, names, and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of such things." ¹⁶So he drove them from the tribunal. ¹⁷And they all seized Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal, but none of these things mattered to Gallio.

Some commend Gallio, saying he is a shining example of the separation of church and state. Others say he was being wonderfully impartial. It doesn't *seem* like that's the sense Luke is giving. Instead, we see a man who could care less. He doesn't even bother to differentiate between Christianity and Judaism. He sees a man being violently assaulted in the courtroom and just lets it happen.

Historical records tell us that Gallio was not a well man. He was dying of consumption. What a sad, missed opportunity. God, in His mercy, allowed a situation in which this terminal non-believer would have the chance to hear from the great apostle, but none of these things mattered to Gallio. As one commentator put it: It matters to him now.⁵

If Luke were here there are a bunch of questions I'd ask him about this particular episode of Paul's life. But, here's what we know from what we see: First, God is always busy accomplishing His purposes. Second, His promises will not fail. Third, His providence is on the move and we are invited to be a part of it. Fourth, because God is so powerful and so gracious, He can use anything that we've consecrated *for* that providence, whether it's our tongue, our time, our money, our home, our sufferings, our triumphs, our friends, or our enemies. Fifth, no city is too far gone and no *person* is too far gone to be saved by the Gospel. Look at Sosthenes. He was not only the new leader of the

⁵ H.A. Ironside *Acts*

synagogue after Crispus became a Christian, but he was *probably* the representative bringing the case against Paul. Their effort was a failure and he was immediately punished for it. It reminds us of how, under the Hussein regime, Olympic athletes were tortured and imprisoned when they would lose a match.⁶

But here's the good part: When Paul wrote his first letter to the Christian in Corinth, this is how it opens: "This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from our brother *Sosthenes*."

We do have to speculate a bit, but it seems *very* probable that this is the same man. Look at what God can do. Even in a city like Corinth. Even when we're low on supply. Even when we're scared or discouraged or feeling alone. Even when the powers that be are against us. Even still, God is able.

Paul had a dream in which Jesus said, "Don't be afraid but keep on speaking." The promise was for Paul, specifically, but that charge to continue on can be ours as well as we live out this life for God's purposes. Knowing He has much to do, many to save, and no end of options when it comes to using our lives as we submit to Him.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/apr/19/iraq.football>