

Chapter 46: Power Made Perfect in Weakness

Acts 18:1–17

In Acts 18, Paul comes to the city of Corinth. Given what we know about Corinth from the two letters to the Corinthians, this history offers interesting background. Here, we see Paul laboring in the midst of significant opposition. Paul’s discouragement seems to get to the point that the Lord intervenes to encourage him personally, telling him, “Do not be afraid” (v. 9). In a city of dazzling power, wealth, and immorality, Paul established the church in this city through faith, but fearful trembling (1 Cor. 2:3). In the planting of the Corinthian church, we see that *Christ’s power is made perfect through weakness*.

Perfect Power through Limitations (Acts 18:1–4)

After establishing a fledgling church in Athens, Paul moves on to the city of Corinth (v. 1). Biblically, the story of the establishment of the church in the city of Corinth is important because of the two letters that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. In those letters we learn in much greater detail some of the pastoral challenges in the church, especially surrounding division (1 Cor. 1:10–17; 3:1–4), an over-emphasis on wisdom and spiritual giftedness (1 Cor. 1:18–2:16; 12–13), relating wrongly to ministers (1 Cor. 4; 2 Cor. 3–4, 10–12), sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:1–2; 6:12–7:40), poorly handled church discipline (1 Cor. 5:3–13; 2 Cor. 2:5–11), lawsuits against fellow believers (1 Cor. 6), idolatry (1 Cor. 8–10), chaotic and unloving worship services (1 Cor. 11; 14), false teaching on the resurrection (1 Cor. 15) and generosity (1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8–10), and more.

Historically, some of the reasons for these challenging church issues may stem from the culture of the city, out of which new believers were saved through Paul’s ministry here. Corinth became politically powerful when it was established as a colony of Rome in 46 BC, and then became economically powerful as trade flourished from its seaports.¹ Unlike Athens, “Corinth did not boast of a single outstanding philosopher; its pride was trade and the arts.”² Beyond its political and financial strength, Corinth was notorious for its sexual immorality, as “the Las Vegas of its time.”³ Yet here, in a city steeped with immorality, Paul comes to preach the gospel.

Again we read that Paul “reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks” (v. 4), according to his ordinary custom. Before that, however, Paul meets two individuals who would become close friends and partners in ministry: “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, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade” (vv. 2–3). Most likely, this command from Claudius was issued in AD 49, which expelled

¹ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 366–67.

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 743.

³ Bock, *Acts*, 577.

an “estimated fifty thousand Jews living in Rome.”⁴ This is an important indicator to help date Paul’s missionary journeys, so that he likely arrived in Corinth around AD 50.

More, we learn that Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla were “tentmakers by trade” (v. 3).⁵ Paul’s insistence to work with his hands to support his own needs is a topic that he addresses at length in 1 Corinthians 9:1–18.⁶ There, Paul explains that taking financial support from the churches would have been his right, that he did not exercise that right: “But I made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting....What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:15, 18). In that context, Paul was careful to insist that his example was extraordinary, and not to be made a rule, citing the teaching of Jesus: “In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14; see Matt. 10:9–10; Luke 10:7). Elsewhere, Paul reiterated the same point: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages’” (1 Tim. 5:17–18).

It is good and right for churches to pay their pastors to free them for ministry; however, to this day, pastors throughout the world labor bivocationally as “tentmakers” to support their families while laboring in various ministry assignments. Speaking personally, I worked for six years in bivocational ministry before receiving a full-time vocational call to ministry. There are benefits and drawbacks to both arrangements. Further, there are different cultural capabilities and expectations that should be taken into account: “Jewish tradition encouraged rabbis to support themselves with some other occupation, while giving religious instruction....Greek culture, however, tended to despise manual labour, which makes Luke’s matter-of-fact record of Paul’s practice here unusual.”⁷ For Paul, working with his hands allowed him to preach the gospel freely and therefore to avoid any criticism from concern for financial gain from the gospel.

Perfect Power through Weakness (Acts 18:5–11)

In v. 5, Luke uses a new phrase to describe Paul’s ministry: “When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus” (v. 5). BDAG defines the word “occupied” in this context as “to occupy someone’s attention intensely”; however, the word is also used to convey a sense of pressure (as when the crowd pressed around Jesus; Luke 8:45) or when Paul himself says that he is “hard pressed [to choose] between” living for Christ and dying to be with Christ (Phil. 1:23).⁸ Here, the idea seems to communicate both the compulsion Paul feels to preach the gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 9:16) as well as the “pressure” that he put on the Jews as he testified “that the Christ was Jesus.”

Once again, we see Paul laboring with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength to glorify Jesus Christ among the Jewish people. Yet, once again, we see the Jewish people rejecting this gospel: “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’” (v. 6). Peterson draws an interesting connection from this

⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 577–78.

⁵ The term “tentmakers” may refer more generally to mean “leather worker” or, as some have argued, may have meant something like weaving goats’ hair. Paul gives us no further explanation about his trade. See Polhill, *Acts*, 383.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 746.

⁷ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Eerdmans, 2009), 508.

⁸ BDAG, συνέχω, 970–71.

passage to the commissioning of the prophet Ezekiel, who was instructed that if he failed to warn the people from God's word, their blood would be upon his own head (Ezek. 3:18–20; 33:6). One specific point of connection is in the term Paul uses for “innocent” (καθαρὸς; *katharos*), which literally means “clean.” As a priest, Ezekiel was consistently concerned with questions of ceremonial cleanness (e.g., Ezek. 4:13–14).⁹ Like Ezekiel, Paul is clean, and therefore innocent from blame since he faithfully preached Christ, in spite of the rejection of these Jews. Earlier, Paul had said something similar about moving on from reviling Jews to preach the gospel to the Gentiles while in Antioch Pisidia (Acts 13:45–46).

Next, we meet two individuals who played a significant role in the early church: Titius Justus, a (Gentile) “worshiper of God” (v. 7), and Crispus “the ruler of the synagogue,” who “believed in the Lord, together with his entire household” (v. 8a). The role of “ruler of the synagogue” was the Jewish equivalent to ruling elders (there was more than one “ruler of the synagogue”; see v. 17) in the Christian church (see 1 Tim. 5:17). These two individuals, along with many others, believed in Christ and were baptized. In 1 Corinthians 1:14, Paul says specifically that he personally baptized Crispus, but then states that he did not baptize many others (only Crispus and Gaius and the household of Stephanas, to the best of his recollection; 1 Cor. 1:14–17).¹⁰

These two responses to the gospel are a familiar part of the histories we have read in Acts, where again we see a mixture of faith and opposition to the gospel. What is interesting here is that the opposition seems to affect Paul so as to prompt the Lord's encouragement for him to persevere in ministry: “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’” (vv. 9–10). With this note, it is interesting to remember Paul's own words recollecting his fearful, trembling entrance into the city that he records in 1 Corinthians 2:3–5: “And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”¹¹ Paul so often seems superhuman in his exploits; however, these passages remind us that Paul accomplished so much because he relied upon his own strength so little. Fearful, trembling, frail ministry is by necessity dependent upon the power of God. Much later, Paul records for us another word he received from Christ to the same effect: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). In the face of such sin, it is interesting to see how many times Paul must be encouraged by the power of the Holy Spirit to persevere in Corinth. After this vision, Paul “stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (v. 11).

Perfect Power through Persecution (Acts 18:12–17)

This story about Gallio gives us further information to help us date Paul's ministry in Corinth even more precisely. At the latest, Gallio's term as proconsul ended around AD 54, although it may have ended sooner. As Polhill evaluates the evidence of Claudius's edict and Gallio's likely term and suggests, “This would place Paul's Corinthians ministry roughly between early 50 and late 52.”¹²

Beyond questions of dating this scene, we have another story where Christian missionaries are attacked and brought before governing authorities. In v. 12, Luke again uses the term ὁμοθυμαδὸν (*homothumadon*), meaning “with one impulse” (Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; 7:57; 8:6; 12:20; 15:25; 18:12; 19:29). It describes united action, whether in a godly direction or, as here, in a sinful

⁹ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 511.

¹⁰ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 371.

¹¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 386.

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, 388.

direction. In this case, the Jews are united in bringing before Gallio the charge that “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law” (v. 13). Whereas Jews had laws permitting them to practice their religion, their argument is that Christianity constituted a new religion who should not be allowed to practice their faith.¹³ Before Paul could answer the charge, Gallio responded by declining to hear their complaint, “since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves” (v. 15). Gallio, in other words, recognizes enough to see that Paul was not offering a different religion, but a different interpretation of the Jewish faith by recognizing Jesus as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah.

Obviously, the Jews were not satisfied with this decision by Gallio. Apparently driven onward by that “one impulse,” “they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal” (v. 17a). As mentioned earlier, there were multiple rulers of a synagogue, just as there are multiple ruling elders in churches today.¹⁴ Luke does not tell us whether Sosthenes had come to faith in Christ, but his beating has something to do with frustration against Christians. Regarding Gallio’s decision to remain hands-off both in relation to the official charge and when he “paid no attention” to the beating of Sosthenes, Bock observes, “The account as a whole shows that Rome is going to stay out of the dispute, if possible. It will not rule for Christianity or against it. There is no real interest in Jewish affairs. Luke shows that the Roman government is not overly concerned about the situation.”¹⁵ This will eventually change as Rome sees an increasing threat from Christianity, although not within the timeline of biblical history recorded in the Book of Acts. For now, the Roman government would not exactly function as an ally to Christianity, but they would also not function as an enemy of Christianity either.

Discussion Questions

1. Where was Corinth located (v. 1)? What was Corinth known for politically? What was Corinth known for in terms of wealth? What was Corinth known for in its reputation for behavior? Who were Aquila and Priscilla (v. 2)? What did Paul share in common with them (v. 3)? What do we know about Paul’s working with his hands to support his needs (1 Cor. 9:1–18)? When he wasn’t laboring, what was he doing (v. 4)?
2. What does it mean that “Paul was occupied with the word” (v. 5)? What specifically was “the word” about Jesus that Paul preached (v. 5)? What kind of opposition would have led Paul to turn from the Jews to the Gentiles (v. 6)? In spite of the opposition, what kind of fruit did Paul see in Corinth (vv. 7–8)? What does the Lord’s encouragement to Paul in v. 9 suggest about the level of Paul’s discouragement in this ministry context? How did Paul respond (v. 11)?
3. Who was Gallio (v. 12a)? When did he serve as proconsul of Achaia (v. 12b)? How does the detail about Gallio and about the decree of Claudius (v. 2) help us to date the events of Paul’s ministry in Corinth? What was Gallio’s response to the charges of the Jews against Paul (v. 14–16)? What was

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 756.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 759.

¹⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 583.

Gallio's response when the Jews beat Sosthenes (v. 17)? How, then, would you characterize the stance of the Roman government toward Christianity here?

4. What does Paul say about his own weakness in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5? What does Jesus tell Paul about weakness that Paul relates to the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 12:9? Why do you think Paul preaches and models such an example of humility to the Corinthian church? Where do you feel weak? Why does the Lord work through weak people? How might the weakness you are experiencing help you to trust in the power of the Spirit?