MINISTRY IN CORINTH

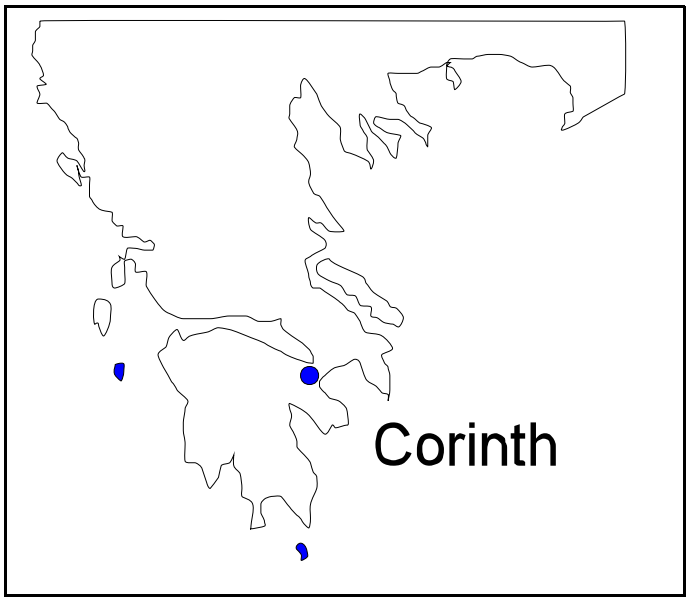
Acts 18:1-18

I have lived in South Florida for all of my adult life. I've traveled throughout the country and to a number of places across the world, but I keep coming back to South Florida. It is a place that has seen a lot of "white flight." I know many who, in the face of all of the multiculturalism that has taken place, have pulled up stakes and have retreated to a more homogenous location. But I continue enjoy living in South Florida. It isn't that this is a place renown for its morality or godliness. Quite the contrary. But it is a place where a little light will go a long way. That may have been one of the reasons that Paul stayed for such a long time in Corinth.

A PLACE FOR MINISTRY

After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. (Acts 18:1).

One of the most strategic areas in all of Greece was the isthmus of Corinth. This narrow land bridge is only four miles wide and is the only connecting link with the Peloponnesian Peninsula to the south.



The city of Corinth grew up on a high plateau on the south end of this isthmus. The city itself lay at the foot of the Acrocorinth, a mighty acropolis rising straight up into the sky to a height of 1800 feet.

Due to this central location, the city of Corinth achieved a position of prominence very early in the history of Greece. It quickly became a trading center for all of Greece. A tram was built so that smaller ships could be dragged across the isthmus on rollers and so avoid the long, dangerous passage around Cape Malea at the southern end of the Peloponnesian Peninsula. Ports were built on either side of the isthmus and this served to further increase the prosperity of Corinth.

The city was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. and lay abandoned for a hundred years until Julius Caesar ordered its rebuilding in 46 B.C. Under Roman Rule, Corinth became the capital of the entire province of Achaia. It now became the vanity fair of the ancient world. The Isthmus Games, held from times unremembered in the Colosseum of Corinth, were now re-instituted and brought athletes from all over the world.

The Temple of Aphrodite, located at the top of the acropolis, became renown throughout the Roman Empire for its 1000 temple prostitutes. Notorious for its immorality, the term *korinthianzomai* (to act like a Corinthian) came to refer to the act of fornication. Thus the city of Corinth could be described in four major points.

1. Commerce.

   Because of its two major ports on either side of the isthmus, the city attracted a great deal of the shipping business. Added to this was its central location on the land bridge connecting northern and southern Greece.

2. Education.

   Corinth had become a smelting pot of may peoples and cultures. Greek philosophy still reigned in the city and the inhabitants took great pride in their reasonings.

3. Sports.

   The Isthmus Games were the most famous throughout the ancient world, even overshadowing the Olympics. These were held every second year and included chariot races and boxing as well as the more conventional track games.

4. Religion.

   The worship of Aphrodite and her fertility cult had heavily influenced the thinking and morality of the Corinthians. Many had been brought up to believe that sex was a normal part of worship and that sexual deviations were "an acceptable alternative."

This was the city to which Paul came from Athens. He had enjoyed only a marginal response in that city with its love of wisdom and philosophy. He had spoken in the Areopagus and some had mocked and some had believed and some had merely shown a casual interest. Now he leaves the city of philosophy and he comes to the city of immorality.

COMPANIONS IN MINISTRY

> *And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, 3 and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working; for by trade they were tent-makers. (Acts 18:2-3).*

Coming to Corinth, Paul fell in with a Jewish couple who had just recently arrived from Rome. We are not told whether or not this Jewish couple were initially Christians. The reason that Paul teamed up with them was that they shared the same secular occupation -- they were tent-makers. It may have been that Paul used this opportunity to get to know them and to lead them to Jesus.

This is Christianity in action. It isn't only to be taken out and dusted off on Sunday mornings and then placed back an a drawer after the morning service. Paul had short-sleeve Christianity. He was a witness for Christ on the job and he led his co-workers to Christ.

Notice that these two Jewish believers had not come to Corinth by choice. They had originally lived in Italy. Politics had turned against them and, showing a flair of anti-Semitism, the Emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews out of the city of Rome.

Claudius had become emperor of Rome in 41 A.D. following the assassination of his nephew, Caligula. The Roman historian Suetonius records the events which led up to Claudius expelling the Jews from Rome.

> *Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from that city. (Suetonius 5).*

Suetonius does not go on to further elaborate as to the identity of Chrestus. Many scholars believe that this is a reference to Christ. If this is the case, then the issue over which the Jews were evicted from Rome was the Jewish persecution of Christians. This would mean that Piscilla and Aquila might have heard of Jesus prior to their coming to Corinth and that they were primed and ready to believe the gospel.

I cannot help but to be reminded of another decree that had come from Rome that resulted in a carpenter from Nazareth and his betrothed bride to make a long and difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Once again, the sovereign hand of God is at work. In His providence, God moves Aquila and Priscilla from the comfort of their home in Rome to far-off Corinth where they will meet another who shares their common profession of tent-making.

> *Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4 who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; 5 also greet the church that is in their house. (Romans 16:3-5).*

God is still in the business of making such divine appointments. I have seen it all too often. We have our own private agendas, but the Lord moves to place us exactly where He wants us to be.

How did you come to know the Lord? Did someone come into your life who shared with you the message of the cross and how Christ died for sins and rose again? Were you born into a Christian family who raised you in the faith? Or did you find yourself in a situation with other Christians who gradually taught you the truth of the gospel? Whatever means were used, you need to know that they did not take place by chance. They were a part of God's eternal plan. It is a plan with your name on it.

A MESSAGE FOR MINISTRY

> *And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. 5 But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 18:4-5).*

The ministry at Corinth got off to a rather slow start because Paul was working full-time and could not devote himself 100% to studying and teaching. This changed when Silas and Timothy arrived in town. With the financial backing that they brought with them, Paul was able to move into high gear.

This illustrates several principles of finance within the church.

1. Ministers of the Gospel have the right to be paid for their labors:

> *Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard, and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock? (1 Corinthians 9:7).*

These questions are asked in rapid succession. These three questions serve to set forth the principle of deserved compensation. It is the principle that says the worker deserves to be compensated for his labors.

This is a principle that is fundamental to working. When you go to work, you expect to be paid for your labors. You expect to be compensated for the time and energy that you have extended. When you walk into a shopping center, you don't just pick up an item from the rack and walk out of the store without paying for it. You understand that the owners of the store want to be paid for that item.

2. There were times when Paul labored in secular employment to provide for his own needs: *If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we should reap material things from you? 12 If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. (1 Corinthians 9:11-12).*

   Paul did not take money from the Corinthians. First he labored with his own hands and then he allowed members of his missionary team to labor for him. Finally, he took money from other churches in order to supplement his work. Why? Because he felt that to do so might have brought a hindrance to the gospel. He did not want anyone to move their focus from the gospel over to money.

   Does this mean that all Christian leaders ought to go out and to do likewise? Does this mean that Christian leaders should always refuse to be paid? Not at all. If God has called a man to devote himself fully to the preaching of the Word, then it might be wrong for him to divide his time and energy with a secular job.

   On the other hand, there may be times when a Christian worker might be led to work to support himself as Paul did, especially if he is in a small church that is financially unable to pay him a sufficient wage.

3. When the opportunity presented itself for Paul to cease secular employment and to devote himself fully to the preaching of the word, he took it.

4. There is nothing wrong with having a minister labor in the secular world, but his effectiveness will be increased as he is set free from such labors to devote himself fully to the ministry of the word.

With the assistance of Silas and Timothy, Paul was able to devote all of his time and energy into the ministry of the Word. In no time at all, he was holding Bible studies in the synagogue in and effort to win Jews over to Christ. It wasn't long before he ran into some serious opposition.

FAILURES AND SUCCESS IN MINISTRY

> *And when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean. From now on I shall go to the Gentiles." 7 And he departed from there and went to the house of a certain man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. 8 And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. (Acts 18:6-8).*

The open door at Corinth slammed in Paul's face as the Jewish resistance to the gospel grew and solidified. But no sooner had one door been closed than another was quite literally opened. Paul moved out of the synagogue and right next door into the home of Titus Justus, a new convert. Paul didn't even have to take down the sign that announced his Bible studies. He merely drew and arrow pointing next door.

It reminds me of the story of a man who owned a small country store in a growing community. One day he learned that a big corporation was going to build a giant department store on the land immediately adjacent to his store. No sooner had the department store gone up than another corporation moved in and erected a large supermarket on the other side of his little country store. The man was wondering how he could possibly stay in business with this kind of competition when he came up with an idea. He went out and bought the biggest sign he could find and placed it over his store with the words, "Main entrance."

This is more or less what Paul did. The results were so effective that even the leader of the synagogue was converted along with his entire family.

A PROMISE FOR MINISTRY

> *And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; 10 for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." 11 And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. (Acts 18:9-11).*

As the hostility against Paul's ministry began to intensify, Paul became afraid. Why do I say this? After all, this is the apostle who stood before kings and governors and boldly proclaimed the gospel. What would make us think that he was possibly afraid? It is the way the Lord addresses him. The Lord says to him, *"Do not be afraid any longer."*

Paul had been through a lot and he was afraid. After all, he well knew what severe persecution could be like. He had been stoned and beaten and imprisoned for his preaching.

Sometimes we get this image of a stained-glass saint who could fear no evil. It is a false image. The truth was that Paul was both weak and afraid. He described such a condition in 1 Corinthians 2:3 when he says, *"I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling."*

How then was he able to function in such a tremendous manner? It was not in his own strength. It was only as he was able to trust in the Lord.

Knowing that will help you when you are afraid. You can trust in the same God in whom Paul trusted. He was weak as you are weak. He was afraid as you are afraid. He was in need as you are in need of the power and promises of God.

What the Lord says to Paul, He also says to you. Jesus echoed the same words when He said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). The Lord says this to all of His people.

- He said it to Moses: *Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. (Deuteronomy 31:6)*.

- He said it to Joshua: *Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you (Joshua 1:5)*.

- He said it to Solomon: *If you will walk in My statutes and execute My ordinances and keep all My commandments by walking in them, then I will carry out My word with you which I spoke to David your father. 13 And I will dwell among the sons of Israel, and will not forsake My people Israel. (1 Kings 6:12-13)*.

- He said it to Israel: *I, the LORD, will answer them Myself, as the God of Israel I will not forsake them (Isaiah 41:17)*.

- Jesus said it to all who come to Him: *All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. (John 6:37)*.

- The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of this teaching: *For He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5)*.

You have the same resource available to you that Paul had in order to see him through his time of need. It is at such a time of need that the Lord appears to him in a vision and promises to protect him from harm while he is at Corinth. The fulfillment of this promise of protection is going to be seen in the next paragraph.

CHRISTIANITY ON TRIAL

> *12 But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, 13 saying, "This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law."*
> *14 But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; 15 but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters." 16 And he drove them away from the judgment seat. 17 And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. And Gallio was not concerned about any of these things. (Acts 18:12-17).*

The Jewish opposition against Paul came to a head one day and the Jews took Paul before the Roman Proconsul, Lucius Junius Gallio. This was a serious matter. Gallio was the Proconsul of all of the Greek peninsula. A guilty verdict from him could not be overturned short of the Roman emperor himself. A guilty verdict from him would mean that the gospel would be outlawed all throughout Greece. That hadn't been the case up to this point. Christianity had not yet come under the attack of Rome. Christians were not being persecuted by the state. That decision now rested in the hands of Gallio.

Gallio was the brother of Seneca, the Stoic Philosopher. He had a reputation for being kind and just. He was only the Procurator for one year, holding the office from 51 to 52 A.D.

Gallio refused to even hear the case. He declined to become embroiled in a Jewish controversy. He dismissed the case and set Paul free.

Furthermore, he did so in the face of Jewish opposition. The same Jewish opposition that had pressured Pontius Pilate into giving a death sentence upon Jesus now failed to intimidate Gallio as he tosses the case out of court.

Imagine the scene. The Jews are gathered together against Paul. They are led by Sosthenes, the new ruler of the synagogue -- the old synagogue ruler had retired by converting to Christianity. They are furious with Paul. They are crying out for his blood.

But suddenly the tables are turned. Paul is released and some of the Gentile bystanders give vent to their anti-Semitism by taking Sosthenes and beating him in the court before the judgment seat. The synagogue leader who tried to have Paul beaten is himself condemned.

The narrative is given to us for a reason. There is a lesson here. It is that God always keeps His promises. Remember that God had promised Paul back in verse 10 that He would keep him from harm. That promise was fulfilled in Gallio's judgment hall when the mob gave Sosthenes the beating that was meant for Paul.

You need to hear this because God has made some promises to you. He has not promised that you will never be beaten for your faith. But He has promised that He will always be there to pick you back up. And He has promised that He will give you the strength to take whatever comes your way.

> *No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13).*

You are going to go through some hard times. They may not come all at once and they may not come soon, but one day they will come. You can be assured that, even when troubles do come, God is still in control He is in charge of the universe and nothing can come your way that has not first passed across a nail-scarred hand.

In the meantime, you need to know that things are not always as they seem. As we read this passage in Acts, it looks as though the cause of justice has lost its case. Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue was beaten. He was actually the new leader of the synagogue. How do I know this? Because back in verse 8 we saw the old leader of the synagogue. His name was Crispus.

> *And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. (Acts 18:8).*

Crispus did not last as the leader of the synagogue. He became a Christian and a new synagogue leader was appointed. The new synagogue leader was Sosthenes. He is the one who was beaten by this mob.

Can I tell you the rest of the story? It isn't found here in the book of Acts. It is found at the very beginning of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. Years later, when Paul sits

down to write an epistle to the Corinthian believers, he addresses it this way:

> *Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother (1 Corinthians 1:1).*

Do you see it? Paul writes this letter and he includes the name of his new traveling companion as the co-author. It is Sosthenes. More specifically, it is *Sosthenes our brother*. That tells me something about Sosthenes. He received a beating, but when he was down, he looked up and met Jesus.

Are you down? Are you going through hard and difficult times? Look up! Know that all things work together for good in the life of the believer. The worst things that happen in your life can be turned to bring about good.

DEPARTURE

> *And Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. (Acts 18:18).*

Paul did not immediately depart from Corinth after the trial. There was no reason to do so. By his deliberate inaction, Gallio had established a legal precedent that viewed the fledgling church as appropriate in the eyes of Rome.

When he did leave, it was with the intention of returning to Syria and to Antioch, the church that had commissioned him in the first place. Accordingly, he set said from the port at Cenchrea, located on the Aegean side of the Isthmus of Corinth.

Did you notice who accompanied him? It was his new-found friends, Priscilla and Aquila. They would accompany him for a time, joining the missionary team.