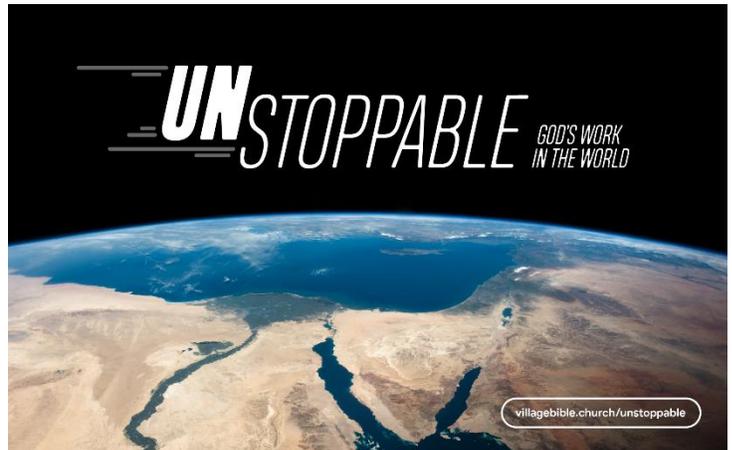




UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World, Part 11

When Life Leaves You Down and Out
Acts 18:1–17 | Tim Badal | November 25, 2018



Let's turn our attention to God's Word. We'll be in Acts 18 in our series "Unstoppable," where we're looking at God's work through the New Testament church. The impact they had despite difficulties and persecution was truly unstoppable because it was empowered by the Holy Spirit. We too have that Spirit residing in us as individuals, and corporately we as a church have been commissioned to go into the world to do exactly what the early church did—make disciples.

Jesus' final command was that the church would make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18–20). We've seen baptism in practice this morning and our other task is what we're about to do now, teach the disciples what it means to obey the commands of Jesus Christ.

We've seen the Apostle Paul doing that as well. In the previous chapters, he's gone out on two missionary journeys. We're now in the middle of his second journey, which began in Antioch—modern-day Syria. After the break-up between Paul and Barnabas, he left Antioch to travel through Galatia and Asia Minor—modern-day Turkey.

Then in the communities of Lystra and Derbe, Paul picked up a new disciple, a young man named Timothy. Eventually Timothy would become a pastor in the church at Ephesus, as we'll see later in this series. They traveled on through Asia, until Paul received a vision from the Lord indicating that they should go next to Macedonia—modern-day Greece.

They obeyed the call and ended up in the city of Philippi. There we're told of three conversions: Lydia, a demon-possessed slave girl, and the Philippian jailer. The jailer was impacted by the miracles and the example of Paul and Silas who had been imprisoned.

Next, they traveled to Thessalonica, where their ministry continued successfully until they were run out of town by a mob. Then they moved on to Berea, which is where they found a hunger for God's Word. The Bereans studied the Scriptures daily and enthusiastically, wanting to know what God would teach them and have them do.

Paul next went to the city of Athens, the capital city of Greece, apparently alone. Athens was the seat of philosophy and higher learning. There he gave a remarkable speech at a place called Mars Hill, in the Areopagus, where he proclaimed that Jesus Christ was the Savior and that Yahweh was the "unknown god" for whom they had long been searching. He told them that God alone should be worshiped and that one day He would hold every man, woman, and child accountable for their response to Him.

From Athens, Paul then traveled to Corinth, which is where we'll find him in Acts 18 today. Let's read the story, beginning in verse one:

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² 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, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

⁵ When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶ 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.”⁷ And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue.⁸ Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent,¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

¹² But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal,¹³ saying, “This man is persuading people 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 wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint.¹⁵ But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.”¹⁶ And he drove them from the tribunal.¹⁷ And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.

At the beginning of Acts 18 we come to a part of the story that many of us may not be familiar with. This may be because we tend to read through these passages quickly and with rose-colored glasses. In other words, we tend to see the Apostle Paul as a machine, a robotic superhero. Yes, he was a great man, but he was still 100% human, just as you and I are. That meant the difficult times in ministry he endured didn't just bounce off him. They dug deep into his very being. The things people said about him, the physical agony he experienced, left physical and emotional scars he would carry throughout his life. He would lament the wrongs done against him over and over again.

We just read about how he left Athens to go to Corinth and are given a picture of Paul as he entered the city. To be honest, it's not altogether pretty. I'm thankful that the Bible includes those things that weren't always pleasant. It describes the times when people were broken, discouraged and didn't seem to have the joy of the Lord as their strength.

Paul definitely endured some difficult times. He received the message from God to go into Macedonia to proclaim the word of God. That vision was validated through the people who were converted. There weren't a large number, but there were some. Little did Paul know that the impact he would have in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth would have long-lasting ramifications, because we now have letters he wrote to the churches that were established in those cities. But at the time, only God knew what the end results would be, and Paul may have wondered if what he was doing was worth the effort. After all, he was beaten, flogged, and imprisoned in Philippi. To be sure, God released him from prison through a miraculous earthquake, but then he was still kicked out of the city after that.

Again in Thessalonica, while he had some profitable conversations and saw some conversions, he was once more reviled and rejected from that city as well. His next stop in Berea saw some good ministry, but right when it seemed he might be getting some respite, people came down from Thessalonica to stir up the people against him. By the time Paul got to Athens, he was probably exhausted. This time he was alone, as he had left Timothy and Silas in Berea and Thessalonica to help build the churches in those cities.

After doing some sightseeing in Acts 17, when he discovered the statue “to an unknown god,” he had the opportunity to stand before a public opinion trial at the Areopagus where he proclaimed that Yahweh was the unknown god they were worshipping. He told them that He was the God over all other gods and that they would be held accountable to Him in the day when He judges the living and the dead. At the end of Acts 17, we learned that some people believed him, although there weren't many. Luke names a couple individuals who responded with repentance and belief. But then when Paul entered Corinth, we can imagine that he was not only physically exhausted, but emotionally spent as well. Paul found himself spent, both physically and emotionally.

On this weekend after Thanksgiving, it would be easy for many of you to be physically tired. Maybe you hosted lots of people this week. Maybe you were doing a lot of decorating, as our family was. This morning you might feel quite exhausted. On another level, many of you may also be emotionally exhausted after spending some time with your family. There are some here in our church as well who have been faithfully serving God and who may also have been beaten up to the point where you're exhausted. Your hair might be turning gray or even falling out. Others of you may have new wrinkles because of the turmoil you've experienced. You could probably identify the trial that has been the source of each wrinkle.

Others of you may find yourself unable to sleep in the middle of the night, although you're exhausted, because of the anxiety you feel. You might know what it's like to have an enemy who desires nothing more than to bring you down, to destroy your reputation and your life as you know it. If this describes you this morning, then you might find yourself identifying with the Apostle Paul.

He entered Corinth in what I believe was one of the darkest hours in his ministry. Jesus had told him these days and seasons would be coming which this is what He tells all His disciples, including us. So don't buy into the idea that salvation brings an easy life.

Rather, the Bible tells us the opposite will be true. Many of us can expect to endure troubles and even persecution as a way of sharing in the sufferings of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of the greatest preachers and one of my favorites as well, said, “Good men are promised tribulations in this world and ministers may expect a larger share than others. Why? So that they may learn sympathy with the Lord’s suffering people and so may be fitting shepherds of an ailing flock.” This was definitely true of the Apostle Paul. If he had only had good experiences, he would have been unable to connect with the many Christians he encountered who were themselves enduring trials. Likewise, as a leader within the church, you should expect more opposition and trials, because through them God enables us to be able to care for those who are hurting. This was a test for Paul, but through it God worked to bring him closer to Himself and to better prepare him to shepherd the churches he would minister to there.

There are three words that I would apply to the city of Corinth. First, it was a cosmopolitan city. It was a large city representing all kinds of ethnicities and socio-economic levels. Southwest of Athens, it was equally famous as somewhat of a suburb. We might compare Athens-Corinth to Chicago-Joliet.

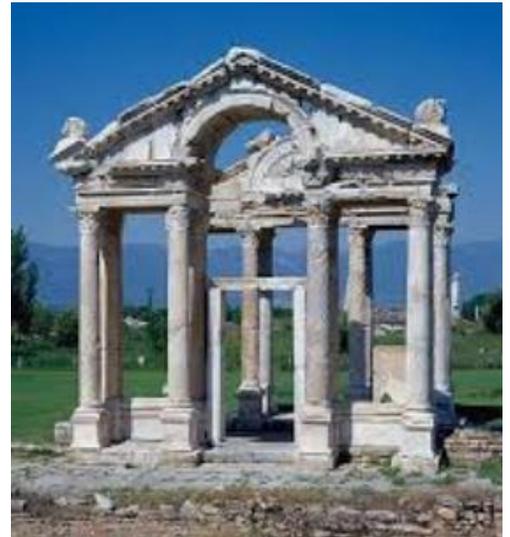
Second, Corinth was a commercial center. It was situated on an isthmus—a narrow strip of land between two bodies of water—so it was a major port where sea merchants did their trading. Yet it also was positioned to allow goods to go from the Aegean Sea to the Adriatic Sea without the dangers of additional sea travel.

Third, and probably most important to us, Corinth was a very carnal city. The name “Corinthian” came to be applied in the Roman Empire to people who were perverted. Someone might say, “You’re living like a Corinthian,” which wasn’t a compliment. You wouldn’t high-five the person who told you that and say, “Thanks for the pick-me-up.” Rather, it might shock you. Corinth was known for perversion and vice. It was the Las Vegas of its day. What you did in Corinth stayed in Corinth. As a result, people would come to pursue all kinds of fantasies and other depraved forms of sexuality. One reason for this was that the temple of Aphrodite stood in the middle of the city. Here’s a picture of the ruins.

It was a beautiful place, with mountains in the background. But that temple was a place where they worshiped love and sex through all sorts of depraved practices. At one point, around the time of Paul, that temple had more than 10,000 prostitutes, both male and female, who served the “worship” there.

It would seem that a God-fearing, Jesus-loving, “Pharisee of Pharisees” Jewish man like Paul would not want to be found anywhere near there—let alone a man who was as broken down as he was then. But that’s where God took him in what was probably the lowest point in his life.

You might wonder why I say that. We just read through the first portion of Acts 18, and there wasn’t anything there about his depression or brokenness. And it’s true



that Luke doesn’t mention it, but that may be because he couldn’t read Paul’s mind and heart. But Paul himself described it in his later letter to the Corinthians. Turn to 1 Corinthians 2, beginning in verse one. Here we are given an “insider” view of how he approached Corinth after leaving Athens: *“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”* Skipping to verse four, he wrote, *“And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”*

We need to realize that Paul came into Corinth “licking his wounds” from his visit to Athens. He had just defended Jesus Christ and God the Father in the most public arena of his day, the Areopagus. He was given three responses: a few believed, a few wanted to hear more, but many reviled him and rejected his message. So while Paul was indeed capable of incredible eloquence, according to Athens’ standards he seemed to be a foolish babbler who didn’t know what he was talking about.

Early in my ministry I attended a conference for pastors where we were to work on our preaching skills. I had been feeling good about how I was doing as a preacher, so I went there excited to learn. But to be honest, I felt like I was back in junior high. Remember, I hadn’t been educated as many who were there. I’m not good with big words and regarding spelling, well, “Hooked on Phonics” didn’t work for me. So midway through the conference, I called Amanda and told her I wanted to come home. I was like a little kid at camp. I told her, “These people are ruthless. They’re sarcastic about my approach to studying the Scriptures.” I felt

like the unpopular kid trying to get invited to the popular kids' table. I thought, "Why am I here? I'm just going to go back and do what I do; as long as my church accepts me, I'm good."

That might have been something like what Paul was feeling when he came to Corinth. He might have thought, "I can't talk with the eloquence or persuasion of those people." He told the Corinthians, "I'm not eloquent like those Athenians. What I did come with is a demonstration of the power of God working through a broken person." Notice what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:3: *"And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling."* This describes how Paul came into Corinth. He was afraid, felt physically weak, and was trembling.

Some of you might describe your walk with God using some of these same words. You might be wondering, "Can I even continue?" The insight this passage gives us is important, because we're going to see Paul's prescription for how to find God's grace when we are down and out. As Christians, we will have those seasons. There will be times when ministry and life in general will be very difficult.

Through a set of circumstances, Amanda and I have endured a more difficult year than any other we've had. Like you, we have had our times when we wanted to throw up a white flag and surrender. But Paul didn't do that, and for that reason he can be a model for us of how we should live life and follow God even when the going gets tough.

I'm going to give you seven things you need to be careful of. When these begin to appear, they should register on your tachometer. Like the tachometer in your car, they will tell you about the load your "engine" is bearing. In Paul's case, he was "red-lining" his tachometer and needed a break.

We need to see that our idea of disengaging, of taking a vacation, is not what God gave Paul. Rather, God gave him some principles so he could continue in his ministry. Here are seven things we need to be aware of:

1. Be careful when you are new to an area. When Paul came into Corinth, he didn't know anyone there. Granted, he had been new to every city on this journey. In each case, he had to start with meeting new people, learning new customs, dealing with new geography.

When we find ourselves in such a situation, it requires that we always work to adjust, because it's not home. Have you ever realized that living in the Fox Valley is pretty easy for us? We know the roads. We know where to shop. We know people. If a problem comes up with your car, you know a good mechanic. But when you're new to an area, you don't have any of that. You have no connections. As long as everything is running as it should, you're fine.

I recently got an email from one of the many people we've lost to out-of-state moves this past year. I responded by asking how things were going for them. They said, "Pastor Tim, both of us are really struggling right now. We don't know anybody here. We haven't found a good church yet. The city is so spread out. It's not like the Fox Valley area. Quite frankly, we're starting to regret that we even moved."

Maybe some of you have moved here and are feeling the same way. When you're new to an area, beware, because discouragement can come. That's where Paul found himself.

2. Be careful when you're alone. Paul was alone on this part of his journey. Acts 18:5 tells us that Timothy and Silas arrived later from Macedonia. Back in Acts 17:14-15, we read, *"Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed."* Paul was the one who told them to stay in Thessalonica, but he also wanted them to join him as soon as they could. He didn't want to be alone.

There are some people who thrive on being alone. I'm not talking about those of you who like a night away from people to do what you like. I'm good for 24 hours on my own, but then my extroverted self falls apart. Amanda can be gone for 24 hours, but after that I'm calling her to say, "Come back now. I'm lonely." Some of you can go longer than 24 hours. We call you "loners" but that's not a good word.

Most people, however, are not hermits—those who want to live life completely apart from society. This may be my extroverted nature showing up, but I believe God designed us to be with people and the Bible supports that. God said it was not good for a man or a woman to be alone (Genesis 2:18). He created us to live in community. Theologically, we believe in a God Who is in community. Within the Trinity there are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, all of Whom commune with one another. Paul did not want to be alone and most of us don't want that either.

Maybe today you feel alone, discouraged and broken. One of the reasons is simply that it's not God's intention that we live in isolation. He wants you to be with people who love and care for you, who can nourish you when you're discouraged and can knock you down when you get too proud.

3. Be careful if money is tight. How many of us find ourselves short on finances? We see that when Paul came into Corinth, he needed to work after he got there. Why was that? Because for the first time, he didn't have anyone supporting him. He didn't complain, but he had to find work so he could pay for his ministry. We're also told that Silas and Timothy brought an offering from the Macedonians. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 we read that Paul was "filled with joy" when that gift came. Apparently, things had gotten really tight for him, and discouragement probably set in.

My parents worked really hard in their business, yet often money was still very sparse. I'm sure they wondered if they would ever get ahead. Beware—when money is tight, discouragement is just around the corner.

4. Be careful when opposition is hard. Paul came to Corinth after a season of great difficulty. No doubt he had scars from his beatings. Perhaps those beatings had even impaired him. They weren't just bruises and contusions. He was probably limping or had injuries to his arms and hands, all of which would have made his work more difficult. We also know he was hated and reviled by people.

If you've ever been hated by someone, you know the emotional stress it brings. Your mind wonders what evil things they're saying about you. You wonder if they're even cursing you. Paul knew he was a hated man. Acts 18:6 tells us he was "opposed and reviled." People there hated him so much that when he moved on to Berea, they sent a group there to stir up opposition and drive him out of that area code once and for all.

When you face opposition, you will become discouraged.

5. Be careful when you have too few successes. When our successes aren't as numerous as we wish, we can easily become discouraged. Paul had given himself wholly to his mission and what did he get in return? A handful of converts. If you add up those named plus their households, it still comes to fewer than 40 converts.

You might think, "Wow, if I had 40 converts, that would be great." But suppose you had sold out for the mission, leaving everything behind, going from city to city to proclaim the very answer you know brings life and an eternity with God, yet only a small handful of people believe your message. Some of you might be satisfied, but I think for those in on-going ministry, this would discourage them.

Paul is now in a new city, and he's wondering, "Is it really worth it?"

6. Be careful when tomorrow seems bleak. Paul wrote that he had entered Corinth with trembling. He didn't use words like "hope" or "excitement."

Does your tomorrow seem bleak? Some of you are there today. Maybe because you're alone, because you face opposition, or because your finances are tight. Maybe you haven't seen the successes you'd expected to see, so when you look ahead the future seems bleak. You're discouraged.

This is where Paul was the day he came to Corinth. We need to realize that Mr. Awesome Paul didn't have it all going for him. He was a discouraged, dejected, and possibly depressed man, who might have been considering throwing in the towel. There he was in a city filled with depravity. As usual, he went first to the synagogue, but what reception did he find there? More opposition. They kicked him out of the synagogue. What was Paul to do?

This brings us finally to the main outline points. When life leaves you down and out, I want you to remember some things. At some point in your Christian life—whether today or next week or next year—you're going to wonder, "Is this worth it?" You need to go to Acts 18 and follow the prescription given there.

When down and out, remember to find friends.

In Acts 18:1-2 we read, "*After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 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.*" It goes on to say that Paul began to work with them, because they both were engaged in tent making.

When he found himself alone in the city, did he just conclude that the God-fearing people in Corinth weren't welcoming? Did he decide that it was God's will for him to be alone? Some people come into a new church and if no one says hello to them, they walk

out and say, "That wasn't a very friendly church, so I'm not going to fellowship with them. I'll just do life on my own." Paul sought out some friends. He was proactive in finding people to help him, people we would call "friends."

What makes a person a friend? First, as we see in our text, there is some point of commonality. Paul was chased out of numerous cities. Aquila and Priscilla had been chased out of their city as well. They had to leave Rome because they were Jews. They all knew what it was like to be hated and rejected from places where they wanted to stay.

Second, friendship involves helping one another. Paul needed money; Aquila and Priscilla had work he could do. This enabled him to buy the food, clothes, and shelter he needed—because of the help of his friends. We too need friends like this, who share common experiences, recognize our needs, and help supply them.

Can I tell you that in this world there are a lot of people who will take withdrawals from your bank? Sometimes they're thankful and other times they just take. You need to find people who will put deposits into your life, encourage you and fill you up so you can keep going. Paul found that in Aquila and Priscilla.

When down and out, remember not to get frustrated.

Paul went into the synagogue to share the good news of Jesus Christ with these Jews, but they rejected his message. "Thanks, but no thanks." What was his response? Look at verse six, but don't try to sanctify this. Paul says, "I'm done with you. May God have mercy on your soul. I'm outta here." He drops the mic and heads out. This is not righteous indignation.

Is he right in realizing they had rejected the gospel? Yes. But when someone rejects our overtures when we're trying to share the gospel in our workplace cafeteria, should we respond, "Well, your blood is on your own head, my friend. May God have mercy on your soul," then drop the mic and walk out? No. In fact, we're told that when we present the gospel of Jesus Christ, we're to do this with gentleness, longsuffering, and respect. Patience is a virtue in our evangelism. But Paul became impatient, and I think the reason was he was frustrated. How many times have you shared the gospel with someone, only to be rejected? Paul was tired of telling people about Jesus and being rejected.

When the going gets tough, the human side of us will feel frustration. We'll want to respond with anger, even with statements that go against what we believe. Paul later regretted what he told the Jews. When he wrote to the Romans, he told them he would give up his own life if his Jewish brothers would just believe. He loved his fellow Jews. He had thrown them up the proverbial creek without a paddle, but in Romans he was willing to go to hell if it meant they would go to heaven.

Many times in our frustration we'll say or do things we really don't believe. So be careful. Don't get frustrated.

When down and out, remember not to let the unknown frighten you.

Paul entered Corinth with weakness and trembling. He was also worried about the future, wondering if the broken record would be repeated yet again. He would preach, some would believe—not as many as he wanted—some would be ambivalent, and some would reject. Those who rejected him would then rise up, beat him up, and throw him out of town. Round and round on that merry-go-round—it wasn't easy to be hopeful. It's exactly what happened in every city he had gone to. So he was probably wondering when the beating would happen.

When you get to that place where you're expecting something bad in the coming week, you're facing an unknown that frightens you, you will not be filled with hope. In that moment, God graced Paul with encouragement, and I believe He will do that for us as well. When we're down, what does He do?

In Paul's case, He came to him in a vision and said, in Acts 18:9–10, "*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.*" Essentially, He was telling Paul, "Your future here is bright. My plans for you are good. But you're to keep doing what you've been doing. This won't be a vacation."

For a lot of us, when things get down, we get out. I can't tell you how many times I've known of people in our church who, when things got hard, the first thing they gave up was serving the Lord. But in all honesty, that's the absolute worst thing you can do. The very thing that God uses to bring you encouragement is all too often dropped. People have time for football, but not for ministry. I get it.

I can't tell you how many times I've written a letter of resignation that said, "This is the week. I'm outta here." But God tells me, "You're a fool. Keep serving Me, because that's the best place to find the encouragement you need." And I'm telling you, He's absolutely right.

God's word to Paul was this: "Be bold, keep serving, don't be silent, and here's what I'll do for you. No one is going to touch you this time. You aren't going to be harmed. Instead, you're going to have more and more opportunities to serve and honor Me."

God gives us similar promises. He doesn't promise that nothing bad will ever happen. What He does promise is that He will always be with us. That's good enough for me, and it should be good enough for each of us.

Paul did continue. He shared the gospel. And when he was rejected by the synagogue—I find this humorous—he left the synagogue and went right next door to start a church. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, got saved. Titius Justus got saved. God began to do a work in the lives of the people of Corinth, and He wants to do that same work in us.

When down and out, continue the fight, knowing God is always faithful.

Paul continued to make a living. He never quit or grumbled about his calling. He didn't tell God, "This is stupid." He continued the fight. Why? He knew God was always faithful. If you walk away with anything today in your broken, down-hearted spirit, realize that when you're down, God is always up. When life is tough, God is always winning. He told Paul, "I've got many people in this city." That tells us that He knows who will be saved long before we do.

Have you ever thought about the people God sees in your neighborhood, workplace, or school whom He has already picked? He just needs you to go tell them about Him. He's been working in their lives and He's offering you the privilege of being a part of their coming to Him. God has the power not only to change your life, but also to change the lives of those you reach out to.

I want you to notice one other thing in this story. God also has the power to change governing authorities. Paul got in trouble in Corinth. Near the end of this passage he went before the proconsul. I'm sure he thought, "Here we go again. I'm heading for a beating and imprisonment." The proconsul, a man named Gallio, heard the Jews' angry accusations against Paul. But this time, because of God's promise, Gallio responded differently. He said, "No one is touching Paul. I see what's going on as just a little Jewish skirmish and I'm not going to involve myself in it." This ruling enabled Paul to stay in Corinth for 18 months, preaching the gospel without interference. Even more importantly perhaps, Paul actually got the respite he so needed for his soul. He never took a vacation. He never stopped the work he was doing. Instead, he trusted God that when he was low, God would raise him up—and God did.

As we close, if you find yourself down today, know that God will raise you up as well. He wants to lift you out of that darkness, out of that burden or struggle. God did this for Paul in Corinth so that when Paul later encountered people who were discouraged or broken, he could share with them the comfort he himself received from God. God takes us through hard times, not to leave us there, but to prepare us so we can share His comfort with others who find themselves where we have been.