

PAUL AND OUR WITNESS FOR JESUS
ACTS 18:1-17

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Bob Erler had an All-American background. After high school he enlisted in the army. He applied for special forces training and ended up as a Green Beret. After his army career he became a police officer in Florida. He was an aggressive officer. Some of his fellow officers called him Supercop.

Unfortunately, as too often happens in law enforcement, he began experiencing marital problems. His wife took their young son and left him. She continued to run up large debts for which he was legally responsible. He became depressed. In chasing a crime suspect, he crashed his police cruiser. He suffered migraines after that.

One evening in 1968 he encountered a homeless woman and her twelve year old daughter. Out of the kindness of his heart, he let them stay in his mobile home. When the mother then tried to extort money from Bob, he flew into a rage and shot and killed the mother and the daughter. He tried to dispose of their bodies but was soon found out. (PROJECTOR ON--- BOB ERLER) He was convicted of the crime and sentenced to 99 years and six months in the Florida State Prison.

Life in prison is always difficult for ex-cops. Bob honed his karate skills and forced other inmates to respect his physical skills. After a few years in the state pen, he was sent to a medium security prison. The warden there did not like Bob and arranged to have him sent back to the maximum security prison. Before that happened, Bob escaped. During his life on the lam he lived with people involved in organized crime. At one point he tried to pick up a revolver that had been mailed to him at a post office in a small town in Mississippi. Authorities were waiting for him. There was a wild car chase, and Bob's car finally crashed. As he tried to run across a field, he was shot in the back. Officers surrounded him, and he expected to be finished off. The big county sheriff caught up to him. Bob swore at him and spit in his face. The sheriff responded, "I love you and Jesus Christ loves you."

Bob Erler did not know how to deal with that response. It did not fit into any categories with which he was familiar. The sheriff continued to treat Bob kindly while he was in the county jail. Bob could not figure him out. But when he was sent back to the Florida State prison, he found a Gideon Bible under his mattress. He began to read it. The prison chaplain sought him out and explained the gospel. Then a group of Christian athletes which included Dallas Cowboy quarterback Roger Staubach spoke in the prison and told the inmates about Jesus. Bob decided to invite Jesus into his life.

Now Bob had to deal not only with the challenge that came from having been a police officer and an escapee, but also with being a Christian in an often hostile environment.

After initial spiritual struggles Bob became serious about trying to follow God. But how does one follow God and be a faithful witness in the midst of very difficult circumstances?

The Apostle Paul also faced challenges in seeking to do God's will and to serve as a witness. He also had probably been guilty of murder for killing Christians and he had spent time in prison. We tend to think of him as being a superhero who didn't have the same fears and doubts and emotional reactions to situations that we have. But Paul was human. (SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) In the last few weeks we have examined Paul's experiences on his second missionary journey. Paul had been forced out of Berea and Thessalonica and Philippi by people who did not like his preaching. (BEREA MAP)

In Phillippi he had been beaten and thrown into jail. In Athens Paul tried to reach the intellectuals with the gospel. (ATHENS MAP) But he got a pretty cold reception. As he headed to his next stop in Corinth, he was down emotionally. We know that (2 CORINTHIAN 2:3) because he would later write to the Corinthian Christians in v. 3 of #2 in his first letter, **"And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling..."**

Do you ever find yourself trying to do God's will and be a witness for Jesus and running into brick walls? Or maybe having people lob the bricks at you? If you have experienced challenges in trying to do God's will, there are lessons in this passage for you.

I.

(I. CHRISTIANS SHOULD EXPECT OPPOSITION) First, in vv. 1-6 of Acts #18 we learn that CHRISTIANS SHOULD EXPECT OPPOSITION. It was about fifty miles from Athens to Corinth. Corinth had a geographic location that helped make it a large and important city. (CORINTH MAP) It was on the only land route that connected the southern region of Greece with the north. It was also the site of important east-west sea trade. The neck of land on which Corinth was situated was only three miles wide at its narrowest point. (ACHAIA MAP) Ships traveling between the Aegean Sea on the east and an arm of the Adriatic Sea on the west were faced with the prospect of going around Cape Malea on the southern end of Greece. But this was notorious for being a dangerous route. One ancient writer said, **"Let him who thinks about going around Malea prepare his will beforehand."**

(CORINTH ISTHMUS) So what happened was that ships in the northern part of the Mediterranean tended to land by one of the two ports near Corinth on either side of this isthmus. (CORINTH CANAL) Today there is a canal that connects the two arms of the Mediterranean Sea. In Paul's day the larger ships would have their cargoes unloaded and transported across to boats on the other side. Smaller ships were actually pulled out of the water and pushed and pulled on logs across this strip of land. (CORINTH DIOLKOS) Remains of the path that was used are still visible today.

The dominant landmark in Corinth was a big hill, called the Acrocorinth (AKROCORINTH), that stuck up 1900 feet over the surrounding plain. In earlier days a huge temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was located here. (APHRODITE TEMPLE) In later days a Roman fort was perched at the top.

It is estimated that Corinth had a population of about 200,000 people in Paul's day. (ANCIENT CORINTH) That compares with only about 10,000 for Athens. Corinth was a Roman colony, which was also the status of Philippi, as you might remember. This meant that it had a special legal status. Its government was modeled on that of Rome. There was more Roman influence here than in the rest of Greece. This was also the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. As a Roman colony, there were a lot of Roman army veterans and their descendants who lived here. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So beside army veterans there were also sailors and truckers, or cart pullers or animal drivers or whatever they used in overland transport. Then also this was a center for the worship of the goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of love. So what kind of moral climate do you suppose existed in this town? It was bad. There was a Greek word that they had which was *korinthiazesthai*. Obviously Corinth was part of that word. Its meaning was "to be sexually immoral." The truth was that Corinth was a wild town. It was noted for its prostitution and drinking and gambling and entertainment. Does this sound like any place that you know?

Paul's trip from Athens to Corinth was a little like going from Boston to New York, or maybe Palo Alto to Las Vegas. He was traveling from an environment noted for intellectualism to one noted for commerce and moral looseness. Corinth then presented some challenges. But it also afforded some opportunities. For down and out blatant sinners are often more receptive to spiritual truth and a message of hope and change than are secular intellectuals. That was to prove to be the case in Corinth.

Paul in heading to Corinth was down emotionally. He had experienced tough challenges in his recent evangelism efforts. He was going to Corinth alone. He didn't have much money. He was headed to a wild town. He was doing God's will, but emotionally--- and perhaps physically--- he didn't feel very good. Have you ever been in the midst of doing what you know God wants you to do and still been discouraged? Take courage. You are not alone.

Verses 2 & 3 tell us that Paul got connected with a Jewish couple named Aquilla and Priscilla who had recently been kicked out of Rome with the rest of the Jews because of an edict of the Emperor Claudius. We know from secular history that Claudius issued this decree in the ninth year of his reign, which would be between Jan., 49 AD, and Jan., 50 AD.

Writing about 70 years after this the Roman historian Suetonius made reference to this edict and said that the reason for it was that the Jews were "**indulging in constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus.**" Most historians take this to mean that Christianity was growing in Rome, and the unbelieving Jews got worked up about it, like

they did in several of the towns in Greece. The emperor looked at what was going on and understood it to be a squabble about proper Jewish beliefs. He just decided to kick all of the Jews out of town.

We don't know when Aquila and Priscilla became believers, but they came to be valuable workers in the cause of Christ. At this point Paul worked with them in the tent making trade. The actual Greek word here refers to leather working, of which tent making was a subspecialty. So the three of them may have made more than just tents.

Paul was a rabbi by training. But in Judaism rabbis were not paid for their teaching. Some of them received subsidies from various sources, but most of them had to learn a trade. Paul's trade was tent making, or leather working. The Jews taught that all boys should learn a trade. There was a saying of the rabbis: **"He who does not teach his son to work, teaches him to steal."** Paul apparently did not have extra money at this point to support himself. He had to go to work to make and sell finished leather products.

His real purpose, of course, in being in Corinth was to preach the gospel. He followed his customary pattern by going first to the synagogue, where he had opportunity to present his message on the Sabbath.

Verse 5 tells us that after a while Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia to rejoin him. It was no doubt an encouragement to have his coworkers back with him. We know from references that we looked at previously that they also brought with them a gift of money from the Christians in Thessalonica. That no doubt enabled him to be "occupied with the word," as our text tells us. First Thessalonians was written by Paul in response to this gift and in response to the news that the Christians in that community were doing well spiritually. So there was encouragement in all of this.

There was also opposition that arose at this time. Verse 6 describes that opposition and Paul's response to it: **"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.'"** This was typical of the kind of response that Paul had been getting in Greece--- get expelled from the synagogue and then preach to the Gentiles and then get forced out of town.

We Christians are prone to think at times that the closer we follow God's will, the easier life will be. That isn't necessarily so. This character Paul was clearly following God's revealed will. But he was often getting beaten or stoned or thrown into jail or run out of town. Jesus did promise His followers that they would have an abundant and meaningful and purposeful life. Paul would testify that he experienced that kind of life. But the Christian life is not a life free of conflict. Jesus said, **"I did not come to bring peace but a sword."** By that He meant that the acceptance and proclamation of His message would produce opposition. People would get mad and angry.

The gospel is a message of peace and hope and forgiveness. It also requires a recognition of sin and spiritual truth. The Jews didn't like being told that Jesus was the

Messiah, and many of the Gentiles didn't like hearing that their sexual and moral behavior was bad. So there was opposition. That is why we encounter opposition today. The Bible indicates that there is a spiritual war going on in this world between the forces of good and the forces of evil. When we strive to do God's will and serve as a witness for Jesus, we should expect opposition.

When word got around the prison in Florida that Bob Erler had become a Christian, very few took him seriously. Inmates and guards made fun of him. Inmates and correctional officers told him that he would never get out of prison. He got into a major fight with another inmate. For a time Bob went back to taking drugs. His decision to become a Christian and to make his commitment known produced much opposition.

The opposition that we face when we strive to follow God's will may not be quite that extreme. But it can be real and painful nonetheless. It may be subtle. It may be not so subtle. It may take the form of objections to our spending time at church. It may be criticism of our insistence upon being honest and truthful at work. It may be pressure to fall back into old habit patterns. Whatever its form or source, it can make life difficult.

II.

But the second lesson from our story is that CHRISTIANS SHOULD EXPECT GOD'S ENCOURAGEMENT. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. CHRISTIANS SHOULD EXPECT...) By skipping down to vv. 9-11 we can discover this principle. Paul did not have direct, audible communication from the Lord every day. But there were a few times in his life when the Lord appeared to him in a miraculous and supernatural way to give him direction or encouragement. This was one of those occasions

According to vv. 9-11, **“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.’”** Why did the Lord tell Paul not to be afraid? He must have been afraid, right? Paul knew where he was going when he died. But that didn't mean that the process of dying was necessarily something to look forward. Being beaten and stoned and run out of town and tossed into jail were hard things. Even the great Apostle Paul had fear. It seems to me that there is some encouragement in that for us. Just because we have times of fearfulness doesn't mean that we are weak and unfaithful Christians. The important thing is that we keep doing the will of God.

The point from this part of the passage is that Paul got encouragement from the Lord when he really needed it. Paul was assured that harm would not happen to him in Corinth. He might face opposition, but he wasn't going to be beat up. He wasn't going to be tossed in jail. Furthermore, he was going to see a lot of fruit in this town. That implied that he was going to be able to settle down here for a while.

Notice also the phraseology where the Lord says, **“For I have many in this city who are my people.”** What did God mean by that? He wasn't talking about Christians who were already in Corinth. He was talking about people who were going to become

believers. God is sovereignly involved in this evangelism deal. There was encouragement for Paul in knowing that the sovereign God had people already lined up, or set aside, to become Christians. The success of the whole operation, in a sense, was not resting on Paul's shoulder. He just had to preach the gospel, and the Lord was going to use that message to create a significant number of Christians in Corinth.

In doing God's will Paul encountered challenges and opposition and discouragement. But he also got encouragement from the Lord. The Lord saw to it that Paul's coworkers showed up to help him out. They came with a gift of money. They brought news that the church that he was involved in beginning in Thessalonica was doing just fine. Paul found fellow tentmakers in Corinth to live and work with who were perhaps already believers. Then he had a vision in which God told him specifically that things were going to work out in Corinth.

Most of you know the story about how I was forced out of a church in Minnesota years ago in a power struggle deal. It was a very discouraging and stressful situation. In the midst of the thing I got a phone call one evening from a roommate I had for one year in my college dormitory many years earlier. He happened to run into another friend of mine at an optometrist's meeting. My college roommate got my phone number from him. This guy told me that he had become a Christian, and he was active in a church and involved with a missions committee. He just wanted to make sure that I knew that. He also told me that living with me was a major factor in his spiritual journey that resulted in him becoming an evangelical Christian. That phone call was a tremendous encouragement to me, and it came at just the right time.

At the time when Bob Erler became a Christian he had doubts about his new faith and what it meant for his life. The Christian who introduced him to Jesus asked him what was the most important thing in his life. Bob told him that it was his son Bobby. The man encouraged Bob to go back to his cell and pray for him. He did. He prayed, **"God... Lord... Jesus... Whoever you are, if you really care about me, I want to know my son some day."**

Two weeks later Bob was called to the visiting area. There was his little son Bobby dressed up in a suit. He had not seen his son in seven years. They hugged, and his son told him that he loved him. It was a tearful and emotional reunion. Bob asked his ex-wife, who was also there, why she had come with Bobby. She replied, **"I don't know. I really don't know how to answer that. I just had a strange feeling it was time to bring your son down here to see you."** Bob recognized this meeting as encouragement that had come from God.

Bob learned that in the Christian life he could expect opposition. But he also came to learn that he could expect to receive God's encouragement. Before the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven He told His followers, **"Behold, I am with you always."** The Lord always keeps His promises. If we have truly put our faith in Him, we can count on getting encouragement from Him when we truly need it.

III.

The last lesson from our passage is that when we are seeking to be witnesses for Jesus, **CHRISTIANS SHOULD EXPECT RESULTS**. (III. CHRISTIANS SHOULD EXPECT RESULTS) We find evidence of that first in vv. 7 & 8. After being kicked out of the synagogue Paul and his Christian friends set up shop in a house next door to the synagogue. It was owned by Titius Justus, who was called “a worshiper of God,” which meant that he was a Gentile who had been worshipping at the synagogue.

It was a great location for the church to meet. Most of the first Christians had been worshipers at the synagogue. So it wouldn't be hard to find the place. Also it afforded Paul the opportunity to have continued contact with people from the synagogue. Thus in v. 8 we are told that Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, was converted. The leader, or president, of the synagogue was a bit different from a present day pastor in that he didn't necessarily do much preaching and teaching. He was more of an administrator. But clearly he was an influential person, because the text says that many other people responded to the gospel when they heard about the conversion of Crispus.

It may be that it was at this point that Paul was especially fearful in that in most of the other towns in Greece when Christianity was beginning to take hold, the Jews got organized and forced the apostle to leave town. But in vv. 9-11 Paul got the encouragement that he needed.

Since Paul was in Corinth for a year and a half, there must have been a lot more of a spiritual nature that happened in the city. The author Luke chooses to focus on one incident involving a Roman official. The reason is that Luke originally wrote this book for an official in Rome named Theophilus. Luke's purpose was to show this Roman official the truth of the gospel and the story of its expansion and its legitimacy in terms of Roman law.

This incident is described, beginning in v. 12. We are told that it happened when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia. That gives us another time indicator in that we know from Roman history that Gallio was installed as governor of this Roman province of Achaia in July of 51 AD, and he served for less than a year. (GALLIO INSCRIPTION) In fact at the temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece, archaeologists discovered this inscription which says that Gallio was in Corinth from July 1, 51 AD to June 30, 52 AD. The province of Achaia (ACHAIA PROVINCE) included the entire southern region of what we know today as Greece. Corinth was the capital of the province.

The suspicion is that soon after Gallio came to Corinth the Jews decided to bring a test case before him to get a ruling on the legitimacy of Christianity in terms of Roman law. Roman law regarded some religions as legitimate and other religions as not legitimate. Those that were legitimate enjoyed certain religious freedoms and protections. Judaism was one of these legal religions. The Jews had the right to build synagogues and practice their religious faith and even proselytize, as long as they didn't try to convert Roman citizens. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The charge, then, that the Jews brought before Gallio in v. 13 was: **“This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.”** It is uncertain whether the Jews were talking about Jewish law or Roman law. In the end it made no difference. The Jews were claiming that Paul and the other Christians were teaching beliefs that fell outside of orthodox Jewish doctrine, and that therefore the Christians didn’t fall under the legal protection of Judaism. These Christians were part of an illegal religion. Their preaching should be stopped, and this Paul should be punished.

Before Paul even had a chance to speak, Gallio declared, **“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.”**

At Philippi and Thessalonica and Athens Paul had been brought before local officials. Now he was facing charges before a Roman governor. The Jews were hoping that they would get a ruling that would have a much broader impact than the finding of local city councils. They wanted to shut Paul up for good. But their efforts backfired.

Gallio had influential ties in Rome. His brother Seneca was a famous philosopher who at this time was tutoring Nero, who would become the next emperor. Gallio’s father was a famous and influential teacher. Gallio was refusing to take a stand in this dispute. But his ruling in effect indicated that the position of the Roman governor was that Christianity fell within the scope of Judaism and therefore was a legally protected religion. This was a very powerful precedent. It meant that wherever Paul went in the Roman Empire he was going to have some legal protection for his preaching. Even when he went to other Roman provinces it was very doubtful that other governors were going to make a ruling that was contrary to what Gallio had decided. In the next ten to twelve years this was going to have a very beneficial effect on the spread of Christianity.

Verse 16 says that Gallio drove the Jews away from the judgment seat. (CORINTH BEMA) In Greek the term is *bema*. [This large stone platform is the bema seat in Corinth. It is probably the place where Gallio passed judgment on Paul and the Jews. The Acrocorinth is in the background. In 2 Corinthians Paul would later write to the Christians in this city that every believer would have to stand before the bema seat of God to be recompensed for his deeds in the body. This is the point of comparison which the Corinthian Christians would have had in their minds.]

Verse 17 indicates that Sosthenes was beaten up by the crowd. Apparently he replaced Crispus as president of the synagogue. But it is not clear who did the beat down. It could have been Gentiles who were anti-Semitic, or it could have been Jews who were mad at Sosthenes for mishandling the case against Paul. Keep in mind that we saw that the Jews had recently been kicked out of Rome. So while Judaism was still a legally protected religion, the Jews weren’t real popular with the Romans. They were on the outs with the Roman emperor. Roman colonies like Corinth tended to reflect the prevailing attitudes in Rome. So this may have been an outbreak of anti-Semitism at the conclusion of this incident. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul went to Corinth feeling down emotionally. Here he encountered more opposition. The first lesson from this passage is that when we are truly trying to do God's will, we should expect opposition. But then we can also count on getting encouragement from the Lord when we need it. Paul's friends rejoined him. He got a financial gift from a church that he had started. He got good news that the Christians in Thessalonica were doing well. Paul had a vision from the Lord Himself. Paul also saw great results from his faithfulness. A lot of people became Christians in Corinth. Perhaps even more importantly Christianity gained the status of being part of a legally protected religion.

In 1 Timothy #1 v. 15 the Apostle Paul called himself the chief of sinners. In describing himself in that way he was thinking of the fact that he had once been a persecutor of Christians. He had been involved in imprisoning and even executing believers in Jesus. His behavior had truly been evil. But the Lord graciously changed his life. Paul committed himself to doing the will of God and serving as a witness for Jesus. In that pursuit he encountered opposition. But he also found encouragement from God, and he witnessed tremendous results.

Bob Erler was a murderer. But his life was dramatically changed as the result of an encounter with Jesus. He faced much opposition in prison. He received encouragement from the Lord when he needed it. As he grew in the Christian faith, he also saw tremendous results. There was a spiritual awakening in that prison. Many came to faith in Christ. The Christians established the Florida State Prison Jaycees. The program became involved in doing good works both inside and outside of the prison.

Eventually Bob was transferred to the Arizona State Prison in Florence. There again there was a great spiritual transformation. In July of 1983 this guy who was supposed to stay in prison for 99 years and 6 months was released from prison. After that Bob became involved in a ministry which meant speaking in jails and prisons across the country. On one occasion he spoke in our church in Connecticut. (PROJECTOR ON--- CATCH ME KILLER) He told his life story in a book entitled *The Catch Me Killer*.

The point is that God can also change our lives for the better if we will trust in the Lord Jesus as our Savior. He can transform even the worst of sinners. He can transform even us. The best possible life comes from the pursuit of His will, which includes being a witness for Jesus. We must, however, realize that we will face opposition in that pursuit. But we can also be confident that we will have divine encouragement and that in the end we will have results that count for something of eternal significance. (PROJECTOR OFF)