

Acts 18:1-18

The start of a sometimes strained friendship

So on we go with our **virtual tour** of the places around the **Aegean Sea** ... nearly 2000 years ago, as the early church spread out from its roots in Jerusalem, Israel - Judea, as it was then - and out into the Gentile world. All the way to Rome itself - which is where Luke finished his account, sounding all very *unfinished*, in Acts 28.

And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

(Acts 28:16)

He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

(Acts 28:30-31)

And maybe you would say that “with all boldness” certainly characterised the whole of the book - though clearly “without hindrance” doesn’t! But if I asked you which of the five places that we’re looking at during August ... that’s (**MAP**) Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth (today), and Ephesus (next week) ... which is the **odd one out** ...? All very intriguing **tourist destinations** - some in better repair than others - but which one sticks out?

I think I’d have to say Athens. Flick through the pages of your NT, and you will find letters to the **Philippians**, to the **Thessalonians**, to the **Corinthians**, and to the **Ephesians**. Letters to the believers in those four cities. One to Philippi, two to Thessalonica, two in the Bible to Corinth, and probably another two that haven’t survived, and Ephesus is the church we know most about in the NT - as I’ll mention next week.

But no letter to the Athenians. There were some people moved by Paul’s message there:

But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

(Acts 17:34)

But *only* some, we’d probably say, whereas in Thessalonica, for example ...

And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

(Acts 17:4)

In Athens, despite being very religious - perhaps *too* religious, though nowadays people would probably talk about it being filled with a huge variety of “spiritualities” ...

... the city was full of idols.

(Acts 17:16)

And there were those self-professed intellectual elite, the members of that Aeropagus group, whom Paul spoke to. An interesting word here:

Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.

(Acts 17:18)

That word means, literally, “lovers of wisdom”. But I wonder if it’s them that Paul is partly alluding to when he writes to the church founded at Corinth?

For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

(1 Corinthians 1:19-20)

Instead of the intellectuals of Athens, Paul and his group now arrive in Corinth, with much more regular people:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

(1 Corinthians 1:26)

But that really doesn’t matter greatly. A church in a university town may well have a lot of members with letters after their name. Somewhere out in the sticks ... such as the **far end of Cornwall** ... it will probably be less. But God can get to work there just as easily.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

(1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

And today we will read again how God didn’t just *call* some nobodies, but *kept on working* amongst them. And 2000 years later, that should give us some hope too. Here’s a church that is

Established
Challenged
Wobbles

- **Established** (1-8)

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

(Acts 18:1)

Better put that on a **map** for you, too. And look closely at the strange geography there, with that very slender strip of land meaning that all the trade flowing north and south was pretty much forced to pass through here. It's very much the **Tamar Bridge** controlling access to, in this case, not Cornwall, but that region that is called the Peloponnese - Greek for "the island of Pelops" (can't remember just who Pelops was, but that's the derivation of the area's name, for sure).

But being **so narrow a strip of land** - a little over four miles - there is another unusual opportunity for the people in this location. Instead of boats sailing down and around the full mainland of Greece, an extra 500 miles ... in something like perhaps 600 BC (isn't that amazing!), they had already rejected the idea of digging a canal across that strip of land, but they laid a limestone track six yards wide, the **diolkos**. And ships could arrive at one end of that, be unloaded, and then *the ships themselves* loaded onto some kind of trailer, and ship and contents hauled across - up and over - those four miles of land.

More recently, a **canal** *has* been dug out, and there are some quite spectacular pictures of that, particularly from the air. It still looks a bit of a faff, being **so narrow**, but it's plainly better than the land route with modern much bigger ships.

But of course, back when Paul was in Athens, there would have been a special haulage industry just dedicated to carrying the ships east-to-west, as well as the more normal north-to-south land trade. All of which would have made Corinth quite a major - and probably quite rich - city. It did have another particular reputation, which I deliberately want to *not* mention right now, because - and if you know what I'm referring to, you might want to wonder just why - Luke doesn't record the slightest hint of it here.

So, basically, another well-to-do Greek city, Corinth. And in 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.

(Acts 18:2)

"Found" could mean simply "came across", as opposed to specifically searching and finding. When we first read this, we would maybe become a bit wary, because many of the Jews that Paul came into contact with in the recent chapters have been quite hostile to the Gospel. But I guess Luke is simply referring to Aquila and Priscilla's background here. By the end of the chapter they're active in discipling Apollos, who went on to be a notable figure in the church at Corinth. So I think we are to take it that these two are already converted, Jews *who have received and believed in the Messiah*. And perhaps, then, on that basis ...

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.

(Acts 18:2-3)

Leather-workers more generally, probably, not simply limited to tents. Just like Joseph “the carpenter” would have most likely been a competent all-round jobbing builder, back in Nazareth.

Not that Paul is quite full-time with this trade. When his missionary team finally catch up with Paul, he’s busy with something else even more important:

And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

(Acts 18:4-5)

Once again Luke uses that “dialoguing” word - and we really do need to remember that sharing the Gospel is going to involve a *lot* of conversation, back and forth, making sure that the truths are not just heard but understood.

The message that Paul is trying to communicate is what I just mentioned that I think Aquila and Priscilla had already become convinced of: the Jesus whom we read about in the Gospels is the Messiah - the one God has anointed, that means - predicted throughout the 2000 years of Jewish history in the OT. That, I’d suggest, is “the word” that Paul was occupied with. Opening up the Jewish Scriptures - which they would probably have memorised, rather than carry around a set of scrolls with them, as we can do, in effect, with slender books of fine paper, or electronic memories on our mobile phones. But the key is that “word”, that message, which will *always* be about Jesus, rather than just religion or philosophy.

So Paul is back to his usual practice now, of starting off by going to the Jews in their synagogue. And the usual backlash sets in, too.

And when they opposed and reviled him, ...

(Acts 18:6)

Following which, there are *Gentiles* who need to hear. Although this “word” is about the person who is the Jewish “Messiah”, he was never intended to be the Messiah *only* of the Jews.

And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; ... he says: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

(Isaiah 49:5-6)

And so on Paul goes.

... 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.” 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.

(Acts 18:6-7)

The very house next door, where a “god-fearer”, Titius Justus, lived - who would therefore have been attending the synagogue, most likely, and therefore heard Paul’s explanation and arguments concerning his treasured Scriptures.

Bet that didn’t go down too well with the traditionalists! But there’s worse for them to come!

Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household.

(Acts 18:8)

And, probably from that base next door to the synagogue, more and more people hear ... *and believe.*

And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptised.

(Acts 18:8)

Many of the Corinthians, believed, baptised - the Scriptural order, just note in passing. If you say you have believed, how are we to believe that unless you seek to be publicly baptised in the name - *into the name* - associating yourself with all the mighty, gracious purposes - of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

Believed, and baptised ... a church was established. A few verses further on - though possibly a couple of years down the line - you see a reference to

... the brothers ...

(Acts 18:18)

Paul writes letters to

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints ...

(1 Corinthians 1:2)

A church is established. And then ...

- **Challenged** (9-18)

It starts with immense encouragement for Paul, though.

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.”

(Acts 18:9-10)

Folks, there are two things here that I want to point out to you, about how good it is to have a God who does not just save but also *reigns*.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

(Isaiah 52:7)

We've got that general promise there about "I am with you", and *always*, on account of that ...

... he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

(Hebrews 13:5-6)

Even if we don't know the specifics, that remains true. Even if we walk in the dark as regards what this world has in store for us, God has lit the path of his intentions and promises for us. But here in Corinth, God gives Paul some specific promises.

Just in passing, for all that people claim that God quite frequently speaks in this kind of specific way nowadays, I don't think that that is what we are to commonly expect. It's not fair to totally write off such things, because we're told ...

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.

(1 Thessalonians 5:19-21)

And that is a very appropriate balance ... which is sometimes tricky to work out in practice. But here in Acts, we are explicitly told that God spoke to Paul in a vision - which is also a pretty unusual means of guidance, in the context of the NT as a whole. So here are definite promises that Paul can absolutely depend on, because *our God reigns*:

"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.'"

(Revelation 3:7)

So, despite what happened in the past, when the Jews got together and made trouble for Paul, trouble enough for him to have to flee, that's not going to happen here. Despite all human wisdom that would say, *You do the same thing, you get the same response*, No! Not this time. Not here in Corinth. God so decrees.

"... no one will attack you to harm you ..."

(Acts 18:10)

And here is something else that *God* says, too.

“... for I have many in this city who are my people.”

(Acts 18:10)

Does that mean *people who are my people now*? Their presence will somehow form some kind of protection? I can't quite see that. Large numbers of believers in an area is no guarantee of protection for Christian workers.

So I suspect it means something else: that *God already has people marked out for salvation in this city*. They're not converted yet. They haven't heard the Good News of Jesus yet. They're still in spiritual darkness. But the locations of every one of them is securely logged into God's radar, and over the next few years, they will be rescued, from all kinds of lifestyles. As Paul subsequently says:

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

(1 Corinthians 6:11)

So Paul responds to that encouragement in the only sensible way:

And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

(Acts 18:11)

And that is the other side of that “sovereignty of God” coin. People are marked for salvation, yes, I believe that. If God were not a God of almighty grace, we're all left to just scrabble for the lifeboat, like those dire scenes of people wanting to flee Kabul this week. But God does not just air-lift people to heaven. He sends messengers, who will teach the word of God, over and over, consistently opening up that trust that will change their hearts and lives.

But that period of special divine protection comes to an end. The challenge has not been totally prevented, only delayed, at God's hand. The Jews, belatedly, get their act together:

But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.”

(Acts 18:12-13)

But actually here is another at least *providence* of God, as we might call it. That Gallio bloke is no dummy. And God uses his alertness - and probably a bit of self-interest, too: this is clearly a no-win scenario to get dragged into! - to frustrate the Jewish challenge. Paul is about to defend himself in court, but he finds he doesn't need to!

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. 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." And he drove them from the tribunal.

(Acts 18:14-16)

And it's not a good idea to be in the way of a frustrated mob. I still feel kind of sorry for this Sosthenes guy, though. First he has to take over when the former leader of the synagogue suddenly gets converted ... and now this legal challenge falls flat on its face. If only the humiliation were as bad as it gets!

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.

(Acts 18:17)

Proverbs, do you think?

Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling.

(Proverbs 26:27)

Whereas Paul, for once, can leave a city with a bit more decorum:

After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila.

(Acts 18:18)

End of story? Paul **sails off into the sunset**? Actually, no. The story of Corinth carries on. It is *not* smooth sailing, despite this wonderfully protected beginning for the church at Corinth. In that way, they are just typical. It is what Jesus said

"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

(John 16:33)

And "tribulations" are not always, I suspect, the big, oppressive State interventions in the lives of believers. The word does often mean something heavy-duty like that, but it can also just mean "trouble" or "pressure". So I think the day-by-day, **drip-drip-drip** low-level assaults on our faith count, too. Those temptations to just finally give way - just a little - after months or years of resisting. The assumptions that everyone around us seems to accept ... slowly becoming part of our mindset, too.

It happened in this church of Corinth, too, and caused ...

- **Wobbles** (1 Corinthians)

When Paul writes to his friends in Corinth, not so very long after all of this, he recognises that they have real faith in Jesus. Well, of course, he had been there among them for quite a length of time:

And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

(Acts 18:11)

After this, Paul stayed many days longer ...

(Acts 18:18)

And so he can say, with the evidence of his own eyes ...

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ...

(1 Corinthians 1:4)

But all of that doesn't mean that the church is going to be perfect. Even if God himself has taken the initiative ...

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

(1 Corinthians 1:9)

... there are going to be things that disappoint and trouble any group of God's people. Folks, our towns and villages are littered with people complaining that they're not going to go to church any more because things weren't perfect when they did.

They feel they weren't cared for enough - though I'm not sure that everyone like this has always regarded that as a two-way street.

They say they have been hurt by what someone said. But they don't seem troubled by what Jesus said about forgiving your brother from your heart.

Or the church hasn't lined up with their particular hobby-horse teaching - so they feel they have a right to ignore what the Bible says about the need and command for Christians to meet together for mutual encouragement.

Actually, I've called these things "wobbles", but I'm being very generous. This church goes on to develop a number of substantial issues that Paul has to publicly write to them about. Although he starts off his First Letter with encouragement, much of it is dealing with these major problems. Here's the first one:

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, ... What I mean is that

each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.”

(1 Corinthians 1:10-12)

We get that too. Some people idolise their favourite Internet speaker. Others are all so superior that they don't rely on *any* human teacher, they *just* use the Bible - them with their super-spiritual hot-line to God.

And the attitude of their home town has clearly rubbed off onto the church, too. Remember I specifically didn't mention that earlier on. The Greek language had coined a new word: we could probably transliterate it as “to Corinthianise”, or translate it as “to corrupt”.

Folks, nowadays it seems that so many churches talking about how their ministry is difficult will quote something about the local demographics. Local deprivation is at this or that extreme level, according to this or that economic indicator. Actually, schools do exactly the same, from what I've heard. As if to say *this is the most important factor to consider when you assess the work of this church (or school)*. And I just note that Luke *didn't even mention* Corinth's reputation when it came to recording Paul's visit to the city.

I wonder if we make too much of those sorts of difficulties when we see our society - we would probably say - morally crumbling around us, as if that is a total disaster for the Gospel. It is a disaster for a lot of individual people and families, for sure. But God called a people in Corinth, despite it all. And that means he can still do the same in 21st-century Britain, too. If anything, I would argue that a **light shows up** best in a dark place.

But it's also fair to note that the Corinthian society and its attitudes had a horrendous effect on the church. By some curious reasoning - perhaps like today, making tolerance of *everything* the supreme virtue ... boasting of how liberal they were!

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, ... And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?

(1 Corinthians 5:1-2)

Wobble isn't really the word for this, is it? And we still haven't finished. Society in those days was like society in our days in other ways, too. Lawyers must have prospered then, too.

I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?

(1 Corinthians 6:5-6)

They argued between themselves over who were the more spiritual, those who refused to eat meat from the market-place, which would have been previously sacrificed to idols, or those who thought this fact was irrelevant.

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up.

(1 Corinthians 8:1)

And the way the church celebrated the Lord's Supper was a travesty of mutual *unconcern*. The rich people came with their hampers, several bottles of Pinot included, and by the time the last few slaves were let off to go to their Christian meetings of "fellowship", the food *and* drink were gone.

When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.

(1 Corinthians 11:20-21)

There's more I could add, but we're out of time now. You get the picture, I'm sure. The Corinth that you see in Acts looked great ... at first. But churches are places with problems. They are filled with problem people, like you and me. They are meant to be outposts of heaven on earth ... and you can see *some* signs of that ... but you can also look and see plenty of evidence that the job is nowhere near finished yet.

Isn't that what you see when you look around here, whether you're here for the first time, or you've been coming for decades? Some things work well, and others ... well ... perhaps not quite the open wounds that we see Paul having to address in Corinth, but ...

But that is not the bottom line. *God* has the bottom line, and he has written it already. We see in Corinth a church that is established, and is challenged, and wobbles. But *God* ...

He is the one ...

... who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

(1 Corinthians 1:8-9)