

[SLIDE # 1] See if you can identify this person from his biography.

When he was 7 years old, his family was forced out of their home on a legal technicality – necessitating him to go to work to help support his family.

- At 9, his mother died.
- At 22, he lost his job as a store clerk.

[SLIDE # 2]

- At 23, he went into debt to become a partner in a small store.
- At 26, his business partner died, leaving him a huge debt.
- At 28, after courting a girl for four years, he proposed, and she said “no.”

[SLIDE # 3]

- At 37, on his third try, he was elected to Congress.
- At 41, his 4-year old son died.
- At 45, he ran for the Senate and lost.

[SLIDE # 4]

- At 47, he failed as a candidate for vice president.
- At 49, he ran for the Senate again and lost.
- At 51, he was elected president of the United States but....

[SLIDE # 5]

- At 52, the country went to war.
- At 53, his 12-year old son died.
- At 56, he was assassinated.

[SLIDE # 6] His name was Abraham Lincoln, of course.

Reading Lincoln’s biography is a “study in discouragement.”

So much adversity, misfortune, failure and tragedy – it’s hard to imagine.

And yet, Lincoln is the person many people consider to be the finest leader we've ever had.

Somehow – he found a way To Rise Above Discouragement.

[SLIDE # 7] Sooner or later: Discouragement visits us all.

It’s part of life in a broken world.

So, how do we rise above it?

How does God encourage the broken hearted?

In Acts 18:1-17, Paul became discouraged.

And how God helped him Rise Above It – is a lesson for us all.

[SLIDE # 8] We're continuing our study in the Book of Acts.

Acts is the story of how the Gospel and the Church went from a few disciples in Jerusalem – to thousands around the world in just 30 years.

Throughout this series, our goal is to recommit to our mission as the ones Christ **SENT** to “witness” to the world.

[SLIDE # 9] Paul, Silas and Timothy are nearing the end of the 2nd of 3 evangelistic tours of Europe and the Mediterranean Basin that the Author (and sometime companion), Dr. Luke, is writing about in Acts.

Last Sunday, in chapter 17, Paul was in Athens alone.

Apparently, Silas and Timothy met up with him there – and Paul sent them back north to check on the churches.

Meanwhile, Paul traveled 50 miles west to the city of Corinth.

[SLIDE # 10] Corinth was a completely different city from Athens.

It was much bigger and it was newer, too.

That's because the Romans had leveled Corinth in 146 BC and rebuilt it a 100 years later in 46 BC.

So, when Paul arrived, no building was older than a century.

[SLIDE # 11] Corinth flourished because of its location.

It was the necessary road going north and south.

And the preferred sea route going east and west.

Which looks wrong – because there's no waterway through the Isthmus of Corinth.

[SLIDE # 12] But about 600 BC, the Greeks created a shortcut for boats across the Isthmus.

They made a road – known as “The Diolkos” – which served as an overland passage between the Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf.

It was an ingenious, 4-mile long, paved trackway for ships to avoid the long and dangerous route around the Peloponnese peninsula.

[SLIDE # 13] They pulled the ship onto a skid and rolled it overland – from one gulf to the other.

This made Corinth an unavoidable destination for both sea and land travelers.

And it made it a strategic city on Paul's bucket list.

[SLIDE # 14 blank] Corinth's population was 20x larger than Athens – estimated at 500,000.

Whereas Athens was a “university city” – like Boston with Harvard and MIT -

Corinth was more like Vegas – with all its sinful vices.

So, Paul was entering new terrain.

It must have been particularly draining to begin again from scratch.

In a letter to the Corinthians later on Paul admitted....

[SLIDE # 15] ^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 2:3** I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.

It must have been overwhelming for a couple of reasons...

[SLIDE # 16 blank] First, Corinth was famous for its immorality- which stemmed from two sources:

1) The large number of transients in the city.

Corinth buzzed with commercial activity.

Port cities, with lots of visiting traffic, are often rife with all sorts of vices.

2) The temple to Aphrodite was there – the Greek goddess of love.

The temple in the center of the city housed her statue.

It's since been destroyed.

It's clear there was some sort of licentious behavior associated with her worship.

Scholars debate the extent of the city's "cultic prostitution" - but, whatever went on in front of her statue – it helped fuel the city's well-known reputation for loose morals.

In fact, beginning in the 5th century, the city's name began to be used as a verb: "to Corinthianize" - which meant to be sexually immoral.

To call someone a "Corinthian" was like calling someone a "pervert" today.

And now Paul was walking into this "red-light district" completely alone.

His friends and co-workers were "on assignment" at previous church plants – leaving him in a strange city.

Loneliness is no small thing - especially when you're facing temptation.

The city was patrolled by female slave-priestesses who walked the city as prostitutes in search of Aphrodite "worshippers."

It's no wonder - years later - Paul would have to write the Corinthians much-needed instructions about sexual purity.

Aside from loneliness, Paul may also have been discouraged due to financial constraints.

Verse 3 tells us that Paul took up tent-making to make ends meet.

[SLIDE # 17] "Tentmakers" repaired all kinds of leather goods – not just tents.

Tentmaking was a common trade in Paul's home province of Cilicia – which produced a fabric made from goats' skins called "cilicium."

By training, Paul was originally a Rabbi.

But according to Jewish practice, every Rabbi must have a trade.

Rabbis were not to take money for preaching and teaching – but make their living by working a respectable trade.

[SLIDE # 18 blank] Now in Corinth, Paul had run low on funds and resorted to his old trade to make money.

He wouldn't take any money from the people who he was trying to reach with the Gospel.

He wouldn't preach on the corner with his hat on the ground in front of him – asking people to throw cash in.

That, he felt, could give the wrong impression: that the gospel was for sale, or it was some sort of merchandise.

Paul didn't want the Church to seem like a “business venture.”

He wasn't trying to become a well-paid CEO of Church, Incorporated.

The Gospel is the free gift of God – and Paul kept his personal finances separate.

Another reason for discouragement was the lack of ministry results.

Verse 4 says: Paul went every Sabbath to the synagogue in Corinth trying to persuade the congregation.

But, his preaching received only a tepid response.

And eventually, verse 6 says, the Jews “became abusive.”

Gospel preaching wasn't going as well as he expected.

In Athens, it appears not enough believed to form a church.

Now here in Corinth, not only is there skepticism, there's persecution.

So, think about Paul's situation.

He's far from home – in a sinful city – his friends and co-workers distant.

He's broke. And only a few are responding to the message he's preaching.

It's not difficult to see why Paul was discouraged.

How easy it would have been to throw in the towel.

Time to wrap this up. Time to head home.

Cue up the “pity-party” track. Commence self-doubt. Recite the “poor mes.”

Where's God? Why is He not blessing me? What's wrong?

But, I think Paul's situation here reveals an important insight:

[SLIDE # 19] Discouragement is common to every Christian.

Think about it: If you're trying to live a godly life in an ungodly world – You're gonna face some pretty strong headwinds – You're gonna be rowing against the current - and therefore you will have times of discouragement and opposition.

It really can't be any other way.

Jesus told us, “You are not of this world. If you were of this world then the world would love its own. But, I chose you out of the world.”
And therefore, the world is bent on discouraging us.

If that’s true – we should find that theme among God’s people in the Bible.

And we do....

- Moses told God he’d had enough.
- David wanted to give up.
- Elijah put in his resignation.
- Daniel, Ezekiel and Jeremiah suffered bouts of discouragement.
- Peter blew it and wept bitterly.

All of us get down from time to time – and some more frequently than that.

I’m not this morning differentiating between medical and spiritual reasons for depression.

My goal is not to *diagnose* it – it’s to share God’s power to *deal* with it.

[SLIDE # 20 blank] Paul didn’t succumb to discouragement - God stepped in to help.
Let’s look at what God did.

First of all, in verse 2, God provided a new friendship.

Paul met a Jewish couple: Aquila and his wife Priscilla.

They were probably ordered out of Rome by the Emperor Claudius around 49-50 AD.

And – what a coincidence – they landed in Corinth!

Even more serendipitous: they were tentmakers!

What are the odds of Paul running into Jewish Christian tentmakers – in Corinth of all places?

Is that a *coincidence*? (I’m thinking this is a God thing!)

This friendship was an incredible gift to Paul!

Think about it!

They could swap stories about their Bar Mitzvahs, Hebrew school, their USY trips to Jerusalem, and their favorite kugel recipe.

And then switch seamlessly (pun intended) into talking about sewing tents!

They had so much in common!

Priscilla and Aquilla were the perfect remedy for Paul’s loneliness!

It’s hard to imagine how God could have arranged a better encouragement for Paul.

But He did!

Because – in v. 5 – Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia.

It says Paul then “devoted himself exclusively to preaching.”

What it doesn’t say is how Paul became able to stop working.

2 Corinthians 11 tells us how...

[SLIDE # 21] ^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 11:9**the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed.

They came bearing a timely financial gift!

Now, money doesn't solve *every* problem – but it sure can alleviate *some*.
And this financial gift enabled Paul to devote himself exclusively to Gospel preaching.

[SLIDE # 22 blank] And now – since many of the Jews had made their decision to reject the Gospel – Paul was able to move out of the Synagogue.
He shook out his clothes in front of the Jews – signaling his protest.

And in another strategic blessing – a “God thing” - a Gentile, Titius Justus, offered his home as a new meeting place.

“Coincidentally” - It was the house immediately next door to the synagogue!

I can't imagine this made the Jews very happy.

It was like “Jews for Jesus” renting an office next door to a synagogue.
(We'll see in minute – the synagogue members aren't going to take *that* lying down.)

But, Paul saw this as a way to keep the Gospel in front of the Jews – even if he wasn't welcomed in the synagogue anymore – now he was right next door!
He loved them too much to abandon them (though they probably wished he would).

And, the new location apparently bore fruit.

Because, verse 8 says Crispus believed in Christ.

Crispus was not an insignificant convert: Crispus was the “synagogue ruler.”

Crispus and his whole family believed in Jesus.

And you can be sure that the entire synagogue heard about THAT!

Which, in turn, must have influenced others to believe.

And this wasn't even the last encouragement Paul received.

The most encouraging moment for Paul must have been: A personal message from Jesus Himself.

It's recorded in verse 9...

[SLIDE # 23] ^{NIV} **Acts 18:9** One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."

Jesus knew Paul needed encouragement to keep on speaking.

So, He told him, “Don't be afraid.”

Paul obviously sensed some threats to preaching so he needed this encouragement.

Think about it - even Paul - the great apostle & missionary – occasionally feared sharing his faith.

So, Jesus encouraged him: “I am with you, Paul.”

“I haven't deserted you.”

And let me tell you – “you’re going to be alright and lead many more people to Me in this city.”

[SLIDE # 24 blank] So, on the basis of this encouragement – Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half.

The longest time he spent in any city yet.

But, maybe, meeting in the house next door to the synagogue was going a bit too far?

Because the new “synagogue ruler,” Sosthenes, tried to get Paul evicted.

He led the Jews’ charge against Paul and forced him into court.

They brought charges against Paul.

But, the governor, Gallio, didn't want to get involved.

And so he dismissed the case – and Paul was set free – setting an Empire-wide precedent that helped Christians everywhere.

Meanwhile, the crowd beat up Sosthenes instead!

Luke doesn't tell us why.

But, Sosthenes becomes another twist in the story!

(And another source of encouragement to Paul!)

Because it appears that Sosthenes then gets saved!

Because when Paul wrote back to the Corinthians, he mentioned that “Sosthenes” was with him.

[SLIDE # 25] ^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 1:1** Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

Assuming this is the same man – which is likely the reason Paul mentioned him – this would have been another source of encouragement for Paul.

[SLIDE # 26 blank] Corinth was a low point for Paul.

It was a corrupt city with many threats and temptations.

It was his last major stop before heading back home.

He was tired, broke, lonely – and seeing little success.

So, why does God allow Paul to get this low?

I think the reason is...

[SLIDE # 27] *Because Discouragement teaches us things about God and ourselves that can't be learned any other way.*

Discouragement taught Paul to rely on God in times of weakness.

That seems to be what Christ told Paul directly. In...

[SLIDE # 28] ^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 12:9** [Christ] said to [Paul], "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." [So Paul changed his mind about *weakness* and wrote] Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my *weaknesses*, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

It sounds counter-intuitive – who boasts about their weaknesses?

We boast about our strengths!

But, this is the secret to learning “How To Rise Above Discouragement.”

The secret is to view our weaknesses as opportunities for Christ to reveal His power.

James put it this way...

[SLIDE # 29] ^{NIV} **James 1:2** Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

In other words: Trials produce maturity.

So now, Paul’s experience in Corinth makes sense.

God used “discouragement” to turn Paul’s visit to Corinth into one of the high points of his journey.

[SLIDE # 30 blank] Instead of *removing* Paul from Corinth – God brought him Pricilla and Aquilla who became lifelong friends and ministry partners.

Instead of giving Paul *immunity* from conflict – God gave him a promise to go through trials together with him.

Instead of telling Paul to pack up and go home – God sustained him for another year and a half with financial gifts and plenty of new decisions for Christ.

God used discouragement to teach Paul to rely on God’s power.

I can say from my own experience – that God has done this for me.

When I’ve felt overwhelmed, overmatched and down in the dumps – the Lord has provided some unique encouragements for me.

- Sometimes it was a visit from a person.
- Sometimes it was a financial gift.
- Sometimes it was greeting card.
- Sometimes it was Fredda’s encouragement.
- But it was always just what I needed – just when I needed it.

Rarely has God just eliminated the source of my discouragement – “poof!” it’s gone!

I realized: God wasn’t surprised by my troubles – as if they caught Him off-guard. Instead, He chose to permit them and encourage me to rely on Him – through them.

[SLIDE # 31] And God’s encouragement isn’t cookie cutter, “one size fits all.”

1. It’s a combination of His Words of promise and hope in Scripture.
2. Plus specially designed blessings, answers to prayer, supports and helps to boost your morale and strengthen your resolve to walk in the right path.

When you stop looking for God to eliminate your troubles – and instead seek His encouragement to persevere through your troubles – you unleash His power in your weakness.

And then you discover “How To Rise Above Discouragement.”

[SLIDE # 32] It sounds terrible to say but: I’m glad Paul was discouraged in Corinth.

Because it means I’m not alone when I’m overwhelmed.

I’m not alone when I want to give up.

Discouragement is part of life in a fallen world.

But, a Christian has the All-Powerful God on His side.

A God who is there when times get tough.

A God who asks us to lean on Him so we can “Rise Above Discouragement.”

My next step today is to...

- Find the God of all encouragement in the person of Jesus.
- Expect there will be times of discouragement in the Christian life.
- Remember that God provides encouragement for His people.
- Look for the lessons about God and myself in discouraging times.