

# Be Strong and of Good Courage

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The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/H4qiR28fKts>

The scripture reading is Acts 18:1-17

As Paul left Athens for Corinth, I am sure he felt like he had taken another beating. Not a physical beating this time, but he was out Hellenized by the Greeks in Athens. Even though He had some success in Athens, Paul also recognized that trying to present the gospel of salvation in a Greek philosophical construct was a big mistake. He admits this mistake in his letter to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 2:1-4 NKJV 1 And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

Going forward, Paul realizes that he faced two disparate worlds. The Jewish people largely looked for prophetic signs and proofs, while the Greek world looked to their philosophical reflections for wisdom and truth. For several reasons, the Jews by and large, were turned away by the message of a crucified Messiah. And the Greeks found the gospel message of Yeshua to be foolishness and superstition.

Paul was able to travel to Corinth from Athens in less than a day, traveling by boat to the port city. Corinth along with its nearby sister city of Cenchrea formed a single large metropolis. Corinth had access to two major ports on opposite sides of a long peninsula. Thus, the two cities formed a major land route between the Ionian and Aegean seas. The Roman historian Strabo describes Corinth.

“Corinth is called wealthy because of its commerce, since it is situated on the isthmus and is master of two harbors, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other.”<sup>i</sup>

Corinth was the location of the last battle against Roman dominance of the former Greek empire. At the time of Paul's visit, Rome had ruled Corinth for two centuries. The city lay in ruin until it was rebuilt during the reign of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. The city that Paul saw in his day was relatively young and vibrant. Corinth played host to the bi-annual Isthmian Games, similar to the Olympic Games in Athens, where thousands of people traveled to watch the athletic competitions. Corinth, at the time of the apostles, boasted a population of over a half million with nearly two thirds of them slaves.

The Corinthians worship a variety of gods but the most dominant was Aphrodite, or Venus in the Roman pantheon. The Temple of Venus dominated a flat-topped rock called the Areo-Corinth. Because of the popularity of the worship of Venus, Corinth had a far-reaching reputation for sexual excesses of all kinds. Even in the open immorality and sexual practices rampant in the Roman world, Corinth stood out as particularly lewd. Literature of the day is replete with metaphors such as to “play the Corinthian,” meaning fornication, and “Corinthian girl” meaning prostitute.

It appears that Paul intended to remain in Corinth for an extended period. He met up with a fellow Jew who had been expelled from Rome and they set up shop in the city center.

Acts 18:1-3 NKJV 1 After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. 2 And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them. 3 So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers.

Markets in the ancient world were divided along ethnic lines, and so did occupations. It stands to reason that Paul would have found a fellow Jew who shared a common trade and would set up shop together in the marketplace.

Paul had arrived in Corinth in the fall of the year fifty AD. The text suggests that Paul spent many weeks in Corinth working his trade in the marketplace during the week and teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbaths.

Acts 18:4 NKJV 4 And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks.

After his limited success in Athens, Paul returned to his previous mode of operation by teaching and arguing the gospel of salvation through Messiah Yeshua in the synagogues on a weekly basis. Paul apparently gained many followers among the Jewish population of Corinth. After several months, Timothy and Silas join him in Corinth.

Acts 18:5 NKJV 5 When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ.

Timothy brought Paul a good report from Thessalonica and from Philippi. Upon hearing Timothy's report and still having some concerns for the congregations left behind in these cities, Paul composed his first letter to the Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 3:6-8 NKJV 6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you-- 7 therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. 8 For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.

It appears that Silas brought Paul some financial contributions as well from the assembly in Philippi. Paul acknowledges these contributions in his letter he wrote to the Philippians several years later.

Philippians 4:15 NKJV 15 Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only.

When Paul and the others preached the gospel to the Jews of Philippi, they were persuaded to stay at the home of a wealthy woman by the name of Lydia. She may have been the primary contributor to Paul's ministry.

As Paul, Silas, and Timothy continued to minister within the Jewish community of Corinth, they once again experienced a hostile push back from some of the Jewish leadership.

Acts 18:6 NKJV 6 But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

The opposition to Paul's gospel message must have been pretty serious for Paul to return with the statement, "your blood be upon your heads." As we have studied earlier, Paul's gospel message of Gentile inclusion was

almost invariably met with opposition from the most religious among the Jews of the various cities in which he traveled.

Paul shook his garment. This was most likely his outer garment which had the tzitzit tied to each corner. At the time of the Apostles, the prayer shawl tallit as we know it today did not yet exist. Paul's cloak would have been his common everyday attire with the tzitzit identifying him as a Jew. By this action and his sharp denouncement about blood on their heads, Paul may have been referring to the words of God spoken by the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 33:1-4 NKJV 1 Again the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 2 "Son of man, speak to the children of your people, and say to them: 'When I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from their territory and make him their watchman, 3 'when he sees the sword coming upon the land, if he blows the trumpet and warns the people, 4 'then whoever hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, if the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be on his own head.

It is apparent that Paul believed final judgment was imminent. The strength of his rebuke of these men reflect their rejection of his message of the kingdom, repentance, and forgiveness. Paul reminds them that they reject the gospel of salvation at their own peril.

Paul announces to them that since they reject the gospel, he will now take the message to the Gentiles of Corinth instead. This is not unlike the instruction Yeshua gave His disciples.

Matthew 10:14-15 NKJV 14 "And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. 15 "Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!

When Paul stormed out of the synagogue, he didn't go very far.

Acts 18:7 NKJV 7 And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue.

Indications are that the believing Jews, along with the Gentile God-fearers began to assemble at the home of the man named Justus. This would be consistent with the already established pattern of small congregations, lacking their own building, opting to meet in private homes. There are other examples of this practice among early believer found in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:11; 16:19, and Romans 16:1. Along with Paul's very strong rebuke and quick departure from the Corinthian synagogue, there was at least one very high-profile defector who left with Paul.

Acts 18:8 NKJV 8 Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized.

It is almost certain that others would have followed Crispus as Luke records many heard, believed and were baptized. It was never Paul's intention to start new congregations, and certainly the thought of a new religion consisting of believers in Yeshua as Messiah separate from Judaism never crossed his mind. Even in forming these new assemblies of believers, they continued in all the ritual practices of Judaism of the time. They continued to keep the feast days and the Sabbaths. As this new assembly of believers was forming, Paul was given another vision by God.

Acts 18:9-11 NKJV 9 Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; 10 "for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many

people in this city." 11 And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

In Corinth we see a community of believers begin to grow and flourish even among the most immoral of social environments. But as the community grew, there was the constant threat of push back and persecution which Paul and the other apostles had already experienced firsthand in other cities. At one time, Paul had already been stoned and left for dead, not by the Greeks or Romans, but by fellow Jews! God gave Paul this vision at just the right time to give him reassurance and encouragement that God was with him in his ministry at Corinth.

God was apparently working behind the scenes to put in place just the right people to protect Paul and the new body of believers growing in Corinth. In his letter to the Romans, Paul refers to one such high profile city official.

Romans 16:23 NKJV 23 Gaius, my host and the host of the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the treasurer of the city, greets you, and Quartus, a brother.

Gaius was another name or title by which Justus was known by. The other name, Erastus, was city treasurer at the time when Paul was in Corinth. We know from archeological evidence, that Erastus later became a city commissioner. A stone inscription discovered in the nineteen twenties with his name, title and date, places this inscription shortly after Paul's time in Corinth.

Paul settled in Corinth for the long haul, staying there for a year and a half. He perhaps continued to work his trade as a tent maker by day and training up the new believers on the Sabbaths. The text of Acts seems to imply that many among the Jews and God-fearers believed and were baptized under Paul's leadership. I get the feeling that Corinth became a community of believers not unlike that established at Syrian Antioch. A community of both Jew and Gentile in unity and fellowship with one another. The primary difference here is that the believers tended to meet in smaller groups and in private homes.

Paul took the message of the vision to heart and this extended stay in Corinth afforded him the opportunity to celebrate many biblical feast days with the new believers in the community. Passover, Pentecost, the High Holy Days, and tabernacles. Paul had the opportunity to teach them about the deeper meaning behind the feast days.

Many Christian scholars make the mistake of assuming that Paul did not teach the new believers to keep the Biblical feasts. But in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians we find Paul instructing them to keep the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread with new understanding.

1 Corinthians 5:7-8 NKJV 7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

It is unfortunate that many Bible teachers today side-step the literal meaning of Paul's words to the Corinthians. They assume that the readers of the letter would take it in purely metaphorical form. That position makes many assumptions that are difficult at best to back up. David Rudolph, a Messianic Jewish scholar argues against that assumption.

"...Why (should we) not preclude the possibility of a literal Passover celebration (of some kind) at Corinth? ...The congregation grew out of the local synagogue. Crispus, the president of that synagogue,

and his family were founding members of the Messianic congregation, (next door) and were joined by Priscilla, Aquila and Apollos – all Messianic Jews who celebrated (the festivals).”<sup>ii</sup>

Even with the assurance of the vision from God, Paul and the other apostles still faced the treat of persecution. Perhaps thinking a newly appointed Roman Proconsul would side with them, the unbelieving Jews of Corinth tried to stop Paul, once again taking him before the city officials.

Acts 18:12-13 NKJV 12 When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat, 13 saying, "This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law."

It was a familiar story; Paul is accused of violating some perceived law. Paul had been in this situation several times before, most recently in Athens, and was prepared to offer testimony in his one defense, but he didn't have to.

Acts 18:14-17 NKJV 14 And when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. 15 "But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters." 16 And he drove them from the judgment seat. 17 Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. But Gallio took no notice of these things.

Paul's time in Corinth was very successful. Many new believers had come to the faith. Even though it was not Paul's original intent, many new congregations of believers sprung up around the city. Despite the persecution, Paul's successes far outweighed his failures. While in Corinth for an extended time, Paul conceivably wrote many letters to the congregations and leaders he left behind in the cities he previously visited. Only the two epistles sent to Thessalonica survive to this day.

What lessons did Paul take away from his experience in Corinth? What would Paul have written to those other congregations? What words of encouragement would he have written to the believers in Berea, Troas, his hometown of Tarsus, and others? We can only speculate that he would have offered admonishment when called for and encouragement when needed.

As we have studied the book of Acts and followed the Apostle's Journey, we have seen Paul and the other apostles in a new light. At least I have. We see a prime example in the life and times of Paul in his journey thus far, of what it takes to be a true apostle for Yeshua in an incredibly hostile world. Paul certainly would have recalled the words God gave to Moses found in Deuteronomy 31:6 as the Children of Israel prepared to enter the Promised land, and echoed in his vision, "Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you."

Study Questions:

1. In Paul's dealings with the Jewish leadership in Corinth, Paul's uses of imagery like that found in Ezekiel 33. Discuss the context of the Ezekiel passage and how it applies to Paul's situation in Corinth. Focus specifically on Paul's use of the phrase "Your blood be upon your own heads."
2. The passage in Ezekiel brings a word of the LORD about the "watchman" (Ezekiel 33:1-7). Who is the watchman? What is his responsibility? In what way is Paul a watchman?

3. When Paul was brought before the Proconsul Gallio, he didn't have to speak a word in his own defense. Was Gallio taking sides in the dispute? Were the charges against Paul, alleged violations of Roman law or Jewish Law (Torah)?
4. How is Paul's approach to his ministry now modified by his experiences in Berea, Athens, Macedonia, and elsewhere?
5. What lessons can we take away from the widely varied experiences of Paul as he traveled from city to city during this journey? How do we apply his experiences to our work today?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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<sup>i</sup> Strabo, Geography 8.6.20,23

<sup>ii</sup> David Rudolph, "Passover in Corinth – 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:7-8", FFOZ Messiah Journal 107 (2011), 58-59