

EMPOWERED IN DISAPPOINTMENT Acts 18:1–17

INTRODUCTION

Last week we watched Paul stand before some of the sharpest minds in the ancient world, in one of the most important speeches he ever gave, and walk away with a strikingly ordinary result. Some sneered. Some politely said, "We'll hear you again about this" — and never did. A few believed. No earthquake. No mass response. Just a handful of names: Dionysius, Damaris, "and others with them."

If you've ever poured everything you had into something — a conversation, a project, a relationship, a season of ministry — and watched it end with a shrug instead of a breakthrough, you already know how that chapter feels from the inside.

This week, Luke doesn't let Paul catch his breath. He simply writes, "After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth." No transition. No debrief. No processing period. Just: after this, he moved on.

And what waits for him in Corinth isn't a fresh wave of momentum. It's silence. No welcoming committee. No synagogue rolling out the red carpet. Paul arrives essentially alone — Silas and Timothy are still back in Macedonia — and by his own later admission to the Corinthian church, he came to them "in weakness and in fear and much trembling." Not the confident, philosopher-sparring Paul of the Areopagus. A tired, uncertain, disappointed man, starting over again in a new city with nothing to show for the last one.

Years later, writing back to the very church being born in this chapter, Paul would explain why that fragility was never actually a problem: "We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves" (2 Corinthians 4:7). Paul isn't hiding his weakness in Corinth. He's telling us, in advance, that the weakness was the point. A cracked, ordinary clay jar was never meant to be impressive on its own. It was only ever meant to hold something greater than itself.

Years ago, I went through a season very much like this one, when I helped plant Gateway of Hope in Houston. I had years of ministry connections behind me by then — real relationships, people I trusted, people who had told me for years they'd be there if I ever started something like this. At first I was hesitant. Planting a church from nothing is not something you say yes to lightly. But after a long season of prayer, I became convinced this was God's will, and I said yes. And if I'm honest, I assumed that yes meant God would simply provide the people and the resources that all those relationships had promised.

What I found out very quickly is that planting a church from scratch is one of the hardest things a person can undertake — and that a great many of the verbal "yeses" people had given me over the years didn't translate into the actual yeses of showing up, engaging, and carrying the vision alongside me. People meant it when they said it. But meaning it and living it turned out to be two very different things. It became very easy, in that season, to grow discouraged — to work hard, to show up with excellence and quality, and still wonder some weeks what we actually had to show for it.

I feel echoes of that same temptation here at St. John's sometimes, and I don't think I'm the only one who feels it. We show up. We do the work with excellence and care. And some weeks it's fair to ask, honestly, what we have to show for it. What Gateway of Hope taught me, the hard way, is that our faithfulness has to

be rooted in God's faithfulness — not in people's, and not in results. People will disappoint you. Results will be slow, or hidden, or simply not what you hoped. God does not.

I think Acts 18 is in our Bibles for exactly this reason. Not every chapter of Scripture is a mountaintop. Some chapters are simply about what faithful people do the morning after the applause doesn't come — when the door you hoped would open stays shut, when the numbers don't move, when the outcome you prayed for quietly doesn't happen. Acts 18 is one of those chapters. And I believe it has something to say to every one of us, and to St. John's, in a season where we are learning together to trust God with things we cannot yet see clearly.

I. EMPOWERED TO RETURN TO ORDINARY FAITHFULNESS (vv. 1–4)

Notice what Paul does not do when he arrives in Corinth disappointed and alone. He doesn't reinvent his approach out of anxiety. He doesn't panic and try something dramatic to force a different outcome than Athens gave him. He doesn't retreat into isolation either. He simply returns to ordinary faithfulness.

Luke tells us Paul finds a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, recently arrived from Rome, and because they share the same trade, he stays and works with them. Tentmaking. Not preaching. Not performing miracles. Manual labor, done with his hands, to pay for the roof over his head. And then, quietly, alongside that ordinary work, "every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue." Not once, as a dramatic reset. Every Sabbath. Week after week. The same discipline he practiced in Athens, continued in a city that hadn't yet given him any reason to expect it would go any differently.

I find that remarkable, because disappointment tends to push us toward one of two extremes. Some of us respond to disappointment by working harder and louder — trying to manufacture through sheer effort the outcome that didn't come naturally. Others respond by quietly giving up — deciding that if it didn't work last time, it isn't worth trying again.

Paul does neither. He goes back to the ordinary rhythm. Work with his hands during the week. Reason in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Show up again next week, and the week after that. Nothing dramatic. Nothing that would make headlines. Just faithfulness, repeated, without any guarantee of what it would produce.

During that same season at Gateway of Hope, what was actually required of us, week after week, was nothing more dramatic than putting one foot in front of the other — walking by faith when our own eyes would naturally have led us toward disappointment. Showing up on Sundays and continuing the ministry, whether the room was full or not.

Stepping up when Hurricane Ike tore through Houston, and becoming a real blessing to a neighborhood that had been severely flooded, even when that labor never translated into a dramatic growth spurt for us. Showing up at the Pride festival every June, in Houston heat well over a hundred degrees, loving and ministering to people there, even when it never translated into them sitting in our sanctuary the following Sunday.

God used that season to teach us something I've never forgotten: to separate faithfulness to the call from expectation of the results. The call was ours to carry. The results were always His to give, on His timeline, in His way.

I think this matters enormously for us as a congregation right now. We are in a season, as a church, where a great deal about our future is not yet clear. We don't yet know exactly what the next chapter of St. John's will look like, and I don't think any of us should pretend otherwise.

But Acts 18 reminds us that seasons like this are not primarily seasons for dramatic reinvention or for quietly giving up. They are seasons for ordinary faithfulness — showing up, worshiping, serving, praying, loving our neighbors — even before we can see exactly where all of it is leading. Sometimes the most important work God does happens in a season that looks, from the outside, like very little is happening at all.

II. EMPOWERED TO TRUST A HARVEST WE CANNOT YET SEE (vv. 5–11)

Eventually, Silas and Timothy catch up with Paul in Corinth, and he devotes himself even more fully to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. And the response, at first, is not encouraging. Luke tells us plainly that when they opposed him and reviled him, Paul shook the dust from his clothes and said, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." That is the language of someone who has reached the end of his rope. It reads like another door closing — like Athens all over again, except with more open hostility this time.

This is, I think, exactly the moment Paul had in mind years later when he wrote, "We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:8–10).

Notice Paul doesn't say pressed and therefore fine. He says pressed, and not crushed. Perplexed, and not despairing. He isn't describing the absence of disappointment. He's describing what disappointment looks like when it's carried by someone who has already learned that the treasure inside the jar doesn't depend on the jar staying intact.

And then something happens that I think is the real heart of this passage. That night, the Lord speaks to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid, but speak 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."

I want you to notice the tense of that sentence very carefully, because I think it's easy to read past it. God doesn't say, "I will give you many people in this city, if you keep working hard enough." God says, "I have many in this city who are my people" — present tense. Already true. Already real. Before a single one of them has believed, before Paul has any visible evidence of it, God tells him the harvest already exists. It simply hasn't become visible yet.

That is such a different way of thinking about faithfulness than the way most of us default to. We tend to measure whether God is at work by what we can currently see — attendance, results, visible response, a plan that's clearly working. Acts 18 tells us something else. Sometimes what looks like scarcity or stalling from where we're standing looks entirely different from where God is standing. Sometimes the field that looks empty to us is already full in the eyes of the One who planted it.

I think about this every time I return to that 1915 ledger from the Women's Guild that planted this church. Eighteen women, meeting in a rented hall, counting pennies, funding a Saturday school, packing relief boxes for victims of a world war that hadn't even ended yet. From where they were sitting, the future was almost entirely invisible. They had no sanctuary. No guarantee the congregation would survive its first decade, let alone reach its second century.

They simply kept doing the next faithful thing — the meeting, the ledger entry, the relief box — trusting a harvest they could not yet see and would not live to see themselves. They had no way of knowing that 108 years later, a congregation would still be gathering because of what they started in that rented hall. God already knew. They simply had to be faithful to what was in front of them.

I think about this often when I think about St. John's. We are a small congregation right now — smaller, in raw numbers, than we have been in a long time. It would be easy to look at that and conclude that God's work here is winding down, or that whatever comes next for this church must necessarily be small and diminished. But Acts 18 will not let us draw that conclusion so quickly. The size of what we can currently see has never been the whole story of what God has already planted. Whatever the next chapter of this church looks like — and we will spend real time discerning that together in the months ahead — I do not believe we are being asked to measure God's faithfulness by what is visible to us in August of 2026. We are being asked to trust that the One who told Paul, "I have many in this city," may still be saying something very similar about San Bruno.

III. EMPOWERED TO RELEASE WHAT WE CANNOT CONTROL (vv. 12–17)

Paul stays in Corinth for eighteen months — a long, unglamorous, unresolved-feeling season, with no indication in the text that it ever stopped being difficult. And then, near the end of that stretch, the Jewish community brings him before Gallio, the Roman proconsul, on trumped-up charges, hoping the legal system will finally silence him the way persuasion and hostility could not.

What happens next is almost anticlimactic. Gallio doesn't even let Paul mount a defense. He looks at the accusation, decides it's a matter of Jewish religious law rather than Roman law, and dismisses the case outright, refusing to be, in his words, "a judge of these matters." Paul isn't vindicated with a dramatic ruling in his favor. He's simply released because the whole case gets waved off as beneath the court's attention.

And then Luke adds one strange, almost throwaway detail: the crowd turns and beats Sosthenes, the synagogue leader, right there in front of the tribunal, and Gallio doesn't even bother to intervene. It's a loose end. An uncomfortable postscript. Not everything resolves neatly, even in a story that technically ends in Paul's favor.

I think that detail matters, because it keeps us from turning this passage into a simple formula — be faithful, and eventually everything gets tied up with a bow. That isn't what happens here. Paul doesn't engineer his own vindication. He doesn't control the timing of the trial, the ruling of the proconsul, or the ugly scene that follows it. He simply stays faithful to the work in front of him for eighteen months, and then watches God work the outcome out in a way Paul never could have orchestrated himself — through channels entirely outside his control.

That is true for us as well, especially as we look toward the future of this congregation. Some of what shapes what comes next for St. John's will genuinely be outside our control — timing, circumstances, decisions made by other people and other institutions, the slow unfolding of things none of us can predict from where we're sitting today. Faithfulness was never about engineering the outcome ourselves. It was about staying at the work Christ has given us, for however long He asks us to stay at it, and trusting Him to work out what we cannot.

CONCLUSION & INVITATION

When I read Acts 18 next to the story of this church, I keep thinking about that ledger from 1916 I mentioned a few weeks ago — the one where an auditor, after reviewing the books of a small congregation living through a world war, simply wrote two words: Alles Richtig. Everything is correct. Everything is in order.

Those women had no way of knowing what St. John's would become. They couldn't see 108 years down the road. They couldn't see this sanctuary, this congregation, this sermon. All they had was the next faithful task in front of them and then they —like Gateway of Hope in Houston had to, and like we are learning to, trust that God already knew what they could not yet see.

I believe that's exactly where Acts 18 leaves us this morning. Paul didn't know, in the middle of that disappointing, uncertain eighteen months in Corinth, that he was writing some of the most important letters in the New Testament to the very church being born there. He simply stayed faithful to what was in front of him, and trusted God with a future he couldn't map.

I don't know exactly what the next chapter of St. John's will look like. None of us do yet. But I believe, the way Paul was told, that God already knows. And I believe our calling right now is the same calling Paul had in Corinth — ordinary faithfulness, trust in a harvest we cannot yet see, and the willingness to release what was never ours to control in the first place.

So let me leave you with this. Disappointment is not evidence that God has stopped working. More often, it's evidence that we've simply reached the edge of what we're currently able to see.

Where has disappointment tempted you to work harder and louder than God is asking you to? Where has it tempted you to quietly give up instead? And where might God be asking you, like Paul, to simply return to ordinary faithfulness — trusting that He already has people, purposes, and a harvest in this place that have not yet become visible to us?

We don't need to see the whole road to be faithful on the next step of it. We only need to trust the One who can already see the end from here.

Let us pray...