



Ordinary*

Date: June 4, 2023

Series: Acts of Paul (Pt 1)

Passage: Acts 18

Speaker: Steve Howell (Associate Minister)



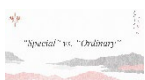
Where is God at Work?

At our recent “Brother’s Breakfast” – our bi-monthly men’s ministry prayer breakfast – one of our church elders, Jerry Parrish, shared a devotional with us. He opened with a question: *Aside from church, where do you feel closest to God?*

Being a typical men’s breakfast, there were a lot of answers involving early mornings in a tree stand or out in a duck blind, breath steaming in the cool, drinking hot coffee from a thermos as the sun dawns over the horizon and illuminates a peaceful scene of natural beauty.

Anyone else relate? I know I do. A situation like that would have me in constant communication with God...mostly as I pray, “God, can we please go inside soon?” (Sorry, I’m not a hunter. And most of my fishing involves hush puppies at Long John’s).

Whether it’s an outdoor scene like that, an intensely beautiful time of worship, or a rare moment of privacy away from the toddlers, we are keenly aware of God’s presence and activity in *special* moments. Much like we highlight weddings and trips and graduations in life, the *special* spaces get most of our spiritual attention.



Our beliefs about God, though, remind us that God is present and active outside the special and miraculous. He is God of the mundane and the boring, God of brushing teeth and taking showers, God of the evening commute and the weekly chores, God of the grocery store and the daily multivitamins.

Our God speaks the world into existence! Our God parts the seas and rescues nations! Our God rules from glory! And he’s still with us on Tuesdays.

Our God calls Moses from the burning bush! He places Noah on an ark! He plucks Daniel from the mouths of lions! And he guards your kids as they get off the bus at the Elementary School and provides for you as you fill up with gas at Casey’s.

Most of us don't inhabit miraculous spaces or count ourselves as "all-stars" of the faith. We live in the ordinary. But that doesn't make our engagement with God any less important or frequent. It doesn't limit that amazing things God can do in us or through us.

Our God is at work in ordinary spaces! And he can work through us ordinary folks, too!



Previously, in Acts...

This morning, I'm excited to continue our sermon series on the book of Acts, specifically as we have been focusing on chapters that talk about the apostle Paul.

- Paul has been undertaking missionary journeys, investing months and years trekking through Asia Minor and Greece.
 - He stops at big cities, finds a local synagogue, and tries to show them that Jesus is the Messiah predicted in Scripture.
 - Some believe; some don't...some threaten and assault Paul! But he presses on and proclaims Jesus with boldness!
- Recently, Paul has travelled to Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens with varying levels of success. His explanations and reasoning prompted different responses from individuals, but now he is ready to move on to a new location.

In this new city and new chapter, our author (Luke), takes the opportunity to highlight some of the other people who participated in spreading the gospel. Acts 18 is filled with new places and friendly faces (and a few unfriendly ones, as well!). Each one contributes to the multiplication of the gospel message and the growth of the church.

We are going to introduced some of these faces today, and as we meet them, we will be reminded that **God is at work with ordinary people in ordinary spaces!**



A New Location (Acts 18:1)

The City of Corinth

Acts 18:1 *"After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth..."*

You can look back at chapter 17 and see what took place in the previous towns, but now Paul heads to the city of Corinth. You've probably heard of this city before:

- As a Christian who knows a little bit about the Bible, you have likely heard of the **New Testament books** of 1st and 2nd Corinthians. These are letters written to the church that Paul plants in this city during chapter 18.
- Outside of the Bible, you may have heard of "**Corinthian**" columns, an architectural term related to an ornate capital carved with stylized leaves)...
- ...or "**Corinthian**" leather, a type of leather that is supposed to convey rich luxury
 - *Fun Fact: This term was made up by an ad agency working with Chrysler cars, and the leather is just from Newark, New Jersey!*



To us, the Greek city of Corinth sounds anything but ordinary! It was a large city of around 200,000 people located on the edge of the narrow isthmus that separates mainland Greece from its large southern peninsula. Because of its geography, Corinth was an important trade city with a unique reputation:

To avoid the stormy hazards of the Mediterranean Sea, especially in wintertime, the owners of small commercial boats sailing between Italy and the eastern Mediterranean often had them dragged over the isthmus¹ from one gulf to the other and spent a night or two in Corinth on the way. As a result, Corinth gained the notoriety of a port city and was widely known for prostitution and other vices. There was even a verb in Greek (korinthiazomai, “to act like a Corinthian”) that referred to sexual immorality.²

This city boasted in its important status, and a moral reputation a little like Las Vegas. And that makes it seem far from ordinary!

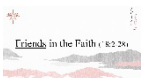


Ordinary Space

But consider the comparison to Vegas. We know that “Vegas” *the tourist spot* is different from Las Vegas *the town*. Las Vegas is home to moms and kids and construction workers and public libraries and dental hygienists. There are high schools and sporting goods stores; McDonald’s and churches; suburbs and accountants...as well as the showgirls and lighting technicians and circus performers who go through their routines every day. Vegas can be an ordinary space; so can Corinth.

Yes, Corinth had a reputation; but to the population that lived there, it was just an ordinary space. It was a city filled with vendors, government officials, and people working in their trades. They shopped in the marketplace, watched shows at the theater, offered lodging for the sailors who passed through town, and worked in the local temples. They lived through summers and winters, knew their neighbors, complained about taxes, and prayed to their gods.

It's *this* side of Corinth I want you to consider as we introduce a few folks. Don’t think about an exotic location where Paul pops in and out...not a brief blip on a foreign missionary journey...but a real space, an ordinary space, where God had been working and would be working to further His Kingdom.



Friends in the Faith (Acts 18:2-28)

The “ordinary” space of Corinth becomes the setting for us to meet several different individuals who are friends in the faith to Paul. And while they might seem “famous” and

¹ They have a canal now!

² New Living Translation Study Bible (1 Co). (2008). Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

special since we hear about them in the Bible, remember that they weren't at the time. They were just average Joes trying to follow Jesus.



Priscilla & Aquila (18:2-3)

The first friends we'll meet are Priscilla and Aquila.

"After this Paul left Athens and went to 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. 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. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks." (Acts 18:1-4, ESV)

Here in Corinth, Paul's first connection is with this married couple... who seem to already know Jesus as their Lord and Savior.



Bible Reading Skill: Can I pause for a quick side note about interpreting the Bible? Please know that we're *inferring* Aquila and Priscilla's prior faith in Jesus from what Luke has written.

When we read Scripture, the principles of interpretation dictate the level of confidence we have in a statement. We prefer a *direct* statement from Scripture whenever possible (and directly stated *multiple times* = stronger evidence!). But if a *logical deduction* can be made...without *conflicting* other, more clear teaching...then we are free to infer information and draw conclusions.

- We know from other *direct* statements that Priscilla and Aquila are believers and co-workers in the ministry. We see their faith on display later in this chapter (Acts 18:26) as well as hearing about them in some of Paul's New Testament letters (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:4; 2 Tim 4:19)
- We know that Priscilla and Aquila are not lumped in with Paul's conversion activities after he arrives in Corinth (18:4).
- We know that Christians existed in their previous home in the city of Rome (cf Acts 2:10), and that the reason they left was the "Edict of Claudius" in AD 49 (referenced in Acts 18:2), which history shows was likely due to the religious arguments between Jews and Christians...much like the conflicts that arose when Paul preached the gospel.

Therefore, based on these facts, we can draw the logical conclusion that Aquila and Priscilla became Christians while living in Rome...before they ever heard of Paul!

Such conclusions aren't "hills to die on" – they are taken with a grain of salt – but they are an important part of handling the Scriptures well!

So, there's your "Bible reading skill" for the day related to *inference* and *interpretation*.



Why does it matter, though, whether Priscilla and Aquila were already Christians?

It connects back to the “ordinary spaces” theme we’re considering. They don’t have a miraculous conversion story like the jailor in Philippi; they are already saved! When Paul arrives, he finds that God is already at work in this town. Paul doesn’t create a church from scratch; he partners with others who believe!

This Christian couple welcomes Paul and allows him to join their already established, normal, ordinary business. Their generosity in offering Paul a place to punch his time clock creates a partnership and a way for Paul to minister to this town...not as a traveler but as a resident. He can help build a functioning and (hopefully!) healthy church and invest in it. His daily interaction with this couple -- who shared the same faith and the same gospel goals -- gives Paul a firm foundation as a “tentmaker” from which to preach.

Note: The trade of “tentmaker” refers to someone making tents and working leather, often for housing Roman military personnel on its bases across the empire. Paul had some skill in this area that he had learned elsewhere. His experience has added to the Christian’s vocabulary. Today, we use the term “tentmaker” for someone who works in a secular vocation to support their own ministry (*ex: Scott Rose used to be the pastor at the Evangelical Friends church in town, but his day job was working at O’Reilly’s. He was a “tentmaker”*).

Through his tentmaking partnership with Priscilla and Aquila, Paul found that God was at work in this ordinary space!



Silas & Timothy (18:5)

As Paul stays and works in town, he meets (or in this case re-meets) some old friends.

“When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.” (Acts 18:5, ESV)

A few weeks ago, in one of our sermons, we discussed these particular co-workers of Paul. Silas is Paul’s missionary companion from Antioch, the man Paul took on this journey as a replacement for Barnabas. Timothy is a disciple who joined them on the way, a believer who earns Paul’s respect and affection.

These men both have Scriptural backing regarding their character.

*“By Silvanus [aka **Silas**], a **faithful brother** as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.” (1 Peter 5:12, ESV)*

*“But you know **Timothy’s proven worth**, how as a **son with a father** he has served with me in the gospel.” (Philippians 2:22, ESV)*

You know how encouraging it can be to find a faithful, familiar face in a new situation, right? Imagine moving to a new town like Corinth on your own and starting brand new relationships, establishing your reputation amongst total strangers.

Maybe you've done that before – packed up and gone to a new city, starting a new job, establishing yourself in a new neighborhood. Deb and I did it when we moved to Louisville, KY, early in our marriage, then later when we moved here to Tonganoxie. We found great people in the new locations, but we know that it is hard. It takes a while to settle in and really become part of the community!

When you are new, then, it is exhilarating when you get a visit from an old friend!

In Louisville, we had early visits from Deb's family and from our college friends Bryan and Char to help make the transition easier. In Tonganoxie, we had visits from our Louisville friends – Heather and Nathan, and Will and Trent.

Their presence lets you have a chance to relax and let down your guard. You already share a connection! You share experiences! You *know* each other, and you don't have to try so hard to make a good impression. Old relationships feel comfortable and normal, like a favorite pair of sneakers.

Paul's friends (Silas and Timothy) provide that kind of comfort and stability for him in the ordinary new town of Corinth. He isn't excited to have all-star evangelists arrive; he is excited to have his friends and co-ministers! He can talk freely with them! He can have lunch with them. He can sit on the hill with them outside the city and pray about the work he is doing. He can discuss his next strategy and teaching points in the synagogue with them.

The friendship with Silas and Timothy doesn't bring anything dramatic. Instead, it adds a level of familiarity to this ordinary space and helps Paul be more effective.



Titius Justus & Crispus (18:6-8)

Paul's ministry causes him to meet some other people who become part of the church. After some Jews in the synagogue are upset about his preaching, Paul responds:

“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.” 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. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.” (Acts 18:6–8, ESV)

We have very little information about these new converts, Justus and Crispus, but that's the point! Paul is gaining a spiritual support system in Corinth that is grounded in the gospel. These are everyday men and women who begin to follow Jesus in their hometown.

Their conversion is exciting, and exciting things *can* happen in ordinary spaces. They just are followed by the humdrum of daily life afterwards.

Think about it. Some of you recently went through graduation. You spent weeks and months preparing for it, inviting people, making travel arrangements, ordering and setting up party supplies, getting dressed up. And then your child or grandchild walks across the stage and you celebrate.

...But then what happens in the morning? Back to the routine! After the weekend, it's off to work and preparing for the next phase of life. The cap and gown get stored, you sort through the cards, and then you start the next adventure.

Extraordinary becomes ordinary in a hurry, whether a graduation or wedding or Super Bowl victory...or an exciting decision to follow Jesus.

The conversions we find here in Acts 18 were bold and lifechanging, but they weren't perpetually exciting. They were just the entrance point to a life we might recognize – a life full of worship and forgiving petty annoyances, a life of prayer for daily aches and pains, a life of loving the people Jesus loves.

Justus and Crispus become ordinary. And God uses them!



“My people” (Acts 18:10)

Priscilla and Aquila, Silas and Timothy, Justus and Crispus are just the start. In the midst of these encounters, God gives Paul a vision:

“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, ESV)

How encouraging is that? *“I have many in this city who are my people.”* They might not be significant enough to name here in the story of Acts, but Paul talks about a few of them in his letter to the Corinthian church. We discover names of people like:



- Gaius (1 Cor 1:14)
- Stephanas (1 Cor 16:17)
- Fortunatus (1 Cor 16:17)
- Achaicus (1 Cor 16:17)

They lived in Corinth, they got baptized in Corinth, they grew in Corinth. God was at work in this ordinary space, building a church in Corinth full of His people who could serve him and strengthen each other.

God's people included some **unlikely allies**, like the Roman proconsul Gallio, who refused to punish Paul for the theological and religious accusations brought against him (18:12-17). God's people also includes **newcomers**, like Apollos – a convert who was enthusiastic about Jesus, but a little misguided in his information. Priscilla and Aquila met him and invested in him and “explained the way of God more accurately” to him. He is then sent to Corinth where he has a powerful impact on the daily life of the church (18:24-28).

Encouraged by God's word and God's people, Paul spends a year and a half ministering to the church in Corinth. But the story in Corinth isn't about Paul, the rockstar apostle. It is about a church, a body of believers, supporting another part of the body while God is at work! It is a beautiful, unremarkable ordinary church!



Ordinary Space, Extraordinary God

Now you might be thinking, “Nice history lesson, Steve. But what does it matter to us?”

Glad you asked!

I love this chapter in Acts because it shows what happens behind the scenes.



It’s like when you get to see behind the scenes in a movie production. There is more going on than what you see on camera. In most of today’s blockbuster movies, you’ll find hundreds of people supporting the effort! There is an army of digital artists who add or adjust elements of a picture. There are costume and makeup professionals. There are lighting experts, and sound FX creators. There are electricians and construction workers and accountants and caterers. Without those people, none of it works. The person on screen may get the credit, but the people IN the lengthy end credits make it all happen.

It's the same in Corinth. As Paul ministered, the story wasn't just about him...it was about the other people who followed Jesus! **God was at work in their ordinary spaces! And he worked through ordinary folks, too!**



The story is the same for you and I in Tonganoxie. **God is at work in our ordinary spaces! And he can work through us ordinary folks, too!**

A couple of weeks ago, I shared an example of this during our offering time, talking about the contributions that led to a baptism (a book on hand because you gave, a phone call we could make because the phone bill was paid because you gave, etc). Other, more spiritual contributions were made...and none of them was by a “Paul” – an “all-star” ministry leader. The spiritual contributions were from ordinary folks.

In fact, most of what happens in the church happens because God is working through ordinary folks! (*And that’s not just because we’re short-staffed!*). Ministry happens in unremarkable moments:

- Encouragement during a friend’s rough patch in their marriage
- Hospital visits during a church member’s unexpected accident
- Prayers for a job opportunity
- Meals after the loss of a loved one
- Texts that send a verse to remind and challenge a friend
- Songs sung together with other Christians
- Joy and laughter during a time of fellowship

Any of these might be done by a minister or elder (a “Paul”) who might show up, but there’s only so many “Pauls” to go around. If we rely on them alone, our church will wither!

You, however, are not Paul. You’re just you! Yet each day you interact with other people and other believers. You have an opportunity to model Christ and show the love of Jesus to

others. Your coworkers see your faith. Your mother-in-law knows that you follow Him. Your neighbor knows you are heading to church on Sunday AM.

This is the beauty of the church. It isn't lived with all-stars doing miraculous deeds. It is lived by ordinary people! In ordinary moments!

Tish Harrison Warren writes:

If we are to spend our whole lives being transformed by the good news of Jesus, we must learn how grand, sweeping truths – doctrine, theology, ecclesiology, Christology – rub against the texture of an average day.³

Our extraordinary God meets us in the ordinary now. We must recognize His work in our ordinary spaces...with us ordinary people...as He carries out His purposes.

He calls us to put all of our being into this project, saying to:

"... love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27, ESV)

But He didn't mean occasionally, when He decides to do the miraculous.

He didn't mean "only if you hit the big leagues in ministry."

He meant you.

He meant now.

He meant in the middle of the ordinary. So consider where and how you are allowing God to work in your daily life. Don't give up or get discouraged.

"And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." (Galatians 6:9–10, ESV)

Take the opportunities – on a Thursday, after you take your allergy medicine, before you go to the post office – to align your heart with God, to follow Him and to love His people. **And watch Him work in ordinary spaces, working through us ordinary folks, too!**

Prayer

³ Paraphrased from author Tish Harrison Warren, p. 24 "Liturgy of the Ordinary"

Notes

Where is God at Work?

Previously, in Acts...

A New Location (Acts 18:1)

The City of Corinth

Ordinary Space

Friends in the Faith (Acts 18:2-28)

Priscilla & Aquila (18:2-3)

Silas & Timothy (18:5)

Titius Justus & Crispus (18:5)

"My people" (Acts 18:10)

Ordinary Space, Extraordinary God

Luke 10:27, ESV

Galatians 6:9–10, ESV

Questions

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Who are the people who make your success possible? (Family, friends, coworkers, etc)
- Is it ever possible to be a spiritual “lone ranger” - a person who doesn't rely on anyone else? Why or why not?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- Look up the city of “Corinth” in a study Bible or Bible dictionary. What might it have been like to live in this town? What kinds of people would you encounter?
- Why do you think Paul supported himself by making tents instead of relying on contributions from the city where he worked? (See 2 Cor 11:7-10; 1 Thess 2:9)
- Read Acts 18:1-3, 18-19, 24-28; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Cor 16:19 and 2 Tim 4:19. How would you describe Aquila and Priscilla’s service to the church? What character traits did they show?
- Paul is usually viewed as bold and brave. How does God’s encouragement to him in Acts 18:9-10 change your view of the pressures Paul faced? Which was more helpful—the promise of God’s presence or the absence of attackers?
- How does Act 18:12-17 prove God’s words?
- Does the gospel message seem concerning to Gallio? How does this encounter help show Christianity as a non-threat to Roman civil order?
- Acts 18 puts a big emphasis on Aquila and Priscilla. How does their ministry take the focus off of Paul and onto the Spirit?
- Think about their encounter with Apollos. How might such inaccuracy be handled today? What can we learn from their approach in correcting Apollos?
- “Ordinary” Christians play a big role in Acts 18. What role do you play in this church now? In what ways can you help others grow closer to God?

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Pray for the “ordinary” members of TCC to view their work as vital to the church! Pray for awakened enthusiasm in serving!