

The wicked city of Corinth was a unique opportunity for Paul. God's promise to keep him from physical harm (Acts 18:9-10ⁱ) and the legal ruling of Gallio (18:14-15ⁱⁱ) enabled Paul to stay longer than he had in any other town to this point in his journeys. This was important because Corinth was at the crossroads of the trade world. A strong church there would influence the region. It was a strategic location. The disciples there needed to be well grounded to continue in the faith.

¹⁸ 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. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. Acts 18:18 "After this," means after the ruling of Gallio. Staying many days longer probably means beyond that year and a half. Priscilla and Aquila accompanied Paul from Corinth as far as Ephesus. He would leave them there to help the church of Ephesus to stay on track and to continue the dialog with the synagogue.

Paul sailed from the port city on the eastern side of Corinth which was Cenchreae. It was about six and a half miles east of Corinth on the Aegean Sea. The port, its fish ponds, and piers are now submerged but are still visible, as also are warehouses and temples to Isis and Aphrodite. Paul was sailing to eventually reach Antioch in Syria to report to his home church about all that God was doing.

We'll see Paul make this same type of vow at the end of his next missionary journey when he arrives at the temple. The person making the vow would cut their hair off in gratitude for God's blessing or in request of a future blessing. During the time of the vow the person abstained from wine and cutting their hair. They could cut their hair at a place other than the temple, but they would eventually take it to the temple to be burned on the altar with the sacrifices. It symbolized offering one's self in sacrificial service to God.

You might ask why Paul would practice an Old Covenant ritual. Once he realized he was justified by faith and not the works of the Law (Romans 3:20-22ⁱⁱⁱ), he was free to worship in the forms prescribed in the law seeing the true significance behind those rituals.

Perhaps the vow had something to do with requesting safe passage to deliver the offering for Jerusalem believers, as we see Acts 21:23,24^{iv}. If so, it was a fulfillment of the apostles' request to remember the poor (Galatians 2:10^v). That is what we do with a large portion of our mission funds and Christmas gifts to the homeless at Hope Cottage and the shoeboxes of Samaritans Purse. Every month we give to three local missions that help the poor with needs and the gospel. We also have our little food pantry for those passing through who are hungry as well as the benevolent fund that helps with one time needs of people going through an unexpected hardship. We strive not to enable those who are unwilling to work, but rather to help those with genuine needs and to show the love of Christ.

19 And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. 20 When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. Acts 18:19-20 Apparently God was leading him to arrive in Jerusalem or Antioch by a certain time and therefore he could not accept the invitation. A Western text adds, 'I must at all costs keep the coming festival in Jerusalem', which Ramsay declared 'may be confidently understood as the Passover'.^{vi} It was unusual for him to leave so quickly after being received by the synagogue, for in most cities he was only able to stay two or three Sabbaths before they kicked him out. I'm sure he would have loved to stay and won more of his Jewish brothers and sisters to faith in Jesus (Romans 10:1^{vii}). Perhaps that is one reason he left Aquila and Priscilla there.

21 But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus. Acts 19:21 Our plans are in God's hands (James 4:15^{viii}). Paul knew that truth, for he had seen God change his plans several times on his missionary journeys (Acts 16:6-7^{ix}). We think we might know what God wants us to do, but then at the last moment God redirects us. That teaches us to trust Him rather than our own inclinations. It keeps us always looking to Him and trusting that He will redirect us if we are going the wrong way.

If we will let go of our futures and say with Paul, "If God wills...", we will find the changes in direction to be exciting rather than frustrating. I find myself vacillating between these two reactions. My flesh is frustrated that I can't do what I wanted or planned to do. We sometimes act like little children who haven't yet learned that life is not all about us. If we will just realize our heavenly Father has better plans for us than we could have for ourselves, and that life is so much more than having our way, then we can look at the unexpected with excitement and anticipation.

22 When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. Acts 18:22 Paul greeted the church - meaning the church in Jerusalem and the apostles who were still there, which is what is implied by the phrase "went up." Then Paul went back to his sending church of Antioch. This was Paul's base. It seems he felt accountable to the elders there who first heard from the Holy Spirit that missionary work was Paul and Barnabas calling^x (Acts 13:1-3^{xi}). The date this took place would have been the early summer of AD 52 to the spring of 53.

It is important for elders to be accountable to one another. We have a problem today with solo leaders of congregations who have a staff that report to that single leader. The nature of man is to look for a king, which is what Israel of old did (1 Samuel 8:6^{xii}). We look for a superman, but the only superman is Jesus. The biblical mandate is for elders (plural) who are equal and accountable to one another. Power in the hands of one man tends toward corruption, as is so often demonstrated in the worlds of politics, finance, media, and corporations. News of late is emphasizing this problem. We need others to help us stay the course and call us out if we are slipping backward in our walk with the Lord. We need the humility to submit to one another's insights while at the same time seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit.

I am so grateful to have godly men as fellow elders. They are all able to give sound instruction, just as is stated in the requirement for elders (Titus 1:9^{xiii}). They are all men who love the Lord and want to know His will more than their own. They are willing to challenge one another and accept instruction from one another. This is not to say that elders will never make mistakes, for they are but men. Yet, this group of men fast and pray and seek to know the mind of Christ together regarding the spiritual affairs of the church. I have no hesitancy to submit to their direction (Hebrews 13:17^{xiv}).

23 After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. Acts 18:23
This is the beginning of the third missionary journey. Paul was headed back to the churches he planted on his first journey with Barnabas. He is taking a route that would cover 1500 miles and included walking over a mountain pass.

This will be his last missionary journey, though the Lord will take him to other cities in an unexpected way. Paul is making certain the church plants were staying true to the Apostles' Doctrine and correcting any error. It is his third trip through the region. To "strengthen" must mean to encourage them in the Lord with Scripture, preaching, and testimonies, all which challenge us to keep pressing forward in our relationship with Christ and spiritual growth. We are to build one another up in the faith (1Thessalonians 5:11^{xv}).

We are all well aware of the constant effort of our old nature trying to reassert its control over our lives. When we find we have let that nature reign for a time, we need to repent and return to putting Jesus first again (Revelation 2:4^{xvi}).

We saw this in our study of Hebrews. Those believers had stood strong in the face of persecution and been willing to suffer. But after a time, they had become reattached to possessions and comfort and put their possessions above walking with the Lord. They had to be reminded of the promise that being glorified with Christ is related to our willingness to suffer with Him (Romans 8:17^{xvii}). **They needed to turn their eyes from the transient things of this life to the wonder of God's love for us displayed in Jesus and the glorious promises that lie before us.** That is our challenge as well. That is what strengthens us and encourages us to be uncompromising lovers of Jesus, and making Him the priority of our lives. We look not at the things that are seen, but at the unseen eternal realm (2 Corinthians 4:18^{xviii}).

Satan's lures are so pathetically insignificant and yet they have a way of capturing our attention with their lying promises. The Word, preaching, fellowship, and prayer all help us to see through the world's lies and to turn toward what we can't see, which is the eternal and that which is of infinitely greater value (1 Peter 1:7^{xix}). This is what Paul was doing for these young churches. It was just as important as his church planting. We see in the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation that most of those churches eventually were compromised by the world and became ineffective because of it (Revelation 2:5^{xx}). If you go to most of those cities today there is hardly a real Christian presence at all.

It is no wonder than that the Great Commission is stated in several ways. Mark tell us that Jesus said to go and preach the gospel to everyone (Mark 16:15^{xxi}). Matthew tells us that Jesus said to go and make disciples and teach them to observe what Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:19-20^{xxii}). Some churches emphasize one over another. Evangelism and discipleship are equally important. Each is a command from Jesus. Paul had that amazing ability to evangelize *and* disciple those converts, and he did it so well with the aid of others that he recruited to work alongside him.

24 Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. Acts 18:24-25 The last portion of our Scripture for today is about Apollos. He was very good with words and mighty in his knowledge of the Scriptures. Someone who had been with John the Baptist told him about John's proclamation to repent and prepare the way of the Lord. He even knew that John had declared Jesus to be the Messiah and accurately taught some of the basics of Jesus' early ministry. People can be anointed by God and be instruments of conveying the message of God but have only a limited understanding. That is the case with most of God's ministers. There is always more to learn.

Apollos had another characteristic that was observable. He was fervent in spirit, or we could translate it zealous in the Spirit (Romans 12:11^{xxiii}). The Greek word for zeal can describe boiling water or red-hot metal. In other words, this man was on fire! He had a passion to proclaim that the Messiah had come. Even though he didn't have the full message, he understood the way of the Lord. The early church was called the Way. That way was to trust in the grace of God shown to us in Jesus (Ephesians 2:8-9^{xxiv}).

How we need men and women of God to have the zeal of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 4:18^{xxv})! These are people who hate sin and love God with their all. They see the world deceiving lost souls and the spiritual battle going on over the eternal destination of men and women. They see people standing on the edge of eternity and they must speak out and let the truth be known. May God light this kind of fire in all our souls. Amen?

26 He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. Acts 18:26 Apollos was accurately speaking and teaching the things of Jesus. However, Aquilla and Priscilla could see that he had not been taught some of the truths of the Apostles' Doctrine. They took him aside and gave him the instruction he was missing, filling in things he did not yet know. Perhaps they included things like the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, or perhaps the outpouring of the Spirit and hope of the Second Coming.

27 And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, Acts 18:27 Apollos had a God given desire to go to the region of Achaia. The brothers in Ephesus confirmed his calling was from the Lord and sent with

him letters of introduction. He strengthened the believers in that region, greatly helping them with his teaching of the Word.

²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. Acts 18:28 He was an excellent apologist to those who honored the Scriptures. He could show from the Scriptures the prophecies fulfilled in the life of Jesus which confirmed that Jesus' words about Himself were indeed true (Luke 24:44^{xxvi}). The brothers who had left the synagogue may have been struggling with doubts sown by the unbelieving Jewish community. Apollos helped them by clearly showing that the Messiah was Jesus, which also probably won more Jews to the faith. Paul mentioned the important work of Apollos in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 3:6^{xxvii}).

This shows us the need for men like Apollos who know the Scriptures and can accurately explain the truth of God's Word (2 Timothy 2:15^{xxviii}). Many people struggle with doubts because God's Word has not been accurately taught. God is often misrepresented by well-meaning but misinformed teachers. That gives the enemy a foothold to sow doubts. The solution is to be like the Bereans and search the Scriptures for ourselves to see if what is being taught is true (Acts 17:11^{xxix}). When we hear the truth taught, there is something of a harmony in the soul of a believer. It strikes the right chord and faithfully communicates the heart of God. That is a great help to those who through grace have believed.

Our take home from today's passage is the need to be accountable to others. Do you have someone from whom you welcome correction if they see you sliding? We also have that great need for teaching from the Word of God to help keep us on the path, to keep us from becoming a law unto ourselves and drifting away. Those churches needed it. We all need it. We must realize there is a spiritual war all around us. I'd also like for us to remember the gifts that Apollos had and to ask for the same: knowledge of the Word, eloquent in speech, and the zeal of the Holy Spirit. Are you on fire? Is there a passion in you to see that truth is proclaimed, that lives are touched, and that people hear the gospel? May God help us to keep pressing forward until we graduate. Amen?

Questions

- 1 Why would Paul worship in an Old Covenant way?
- 2 How can you remember the poor?
- 3 What can we learn from "if God wills"?
- 4 What did the final act of the vow represent?
- 5 Why does Paul see the need to return to Antioch?
- 6 Why did Paul return to churches he already visited?
- 7 What did he do for them? How?
- 8 Describe Apollos.
- 9 What was he lacking?
- 10 How did God work through him?

i Acts 18:9-10 (ESV)

⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent,

¹⁰ 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."

ii Acts 18:14-15 (ESV)

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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."

iii Romans 3:20-22 (ESV)

²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

iv Acts 21:23-24 (ESV)

²³ Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow;

²⁴ take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.

v Galatians 2:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

^{vi} Ramsey, *St. Paul*, p 263

vii Romans 10:1 (ESV)

¹ Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

viii James 4:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

ix Acts 16:6-7 (ESV)

⁶ And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

^x Luke wants to make clear that Paul was accountable and kept contact with the church's old centers.

"Paul is not a loner, founding a separate, Pauline church, but a major figure in the one mission which began in Jerusalem and was effectively continued from Antioch.... Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:220

xi Acts 13:1-3 (ESV)

¹ Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

xii 1 Samuel 8:6 (ESV)

⁶ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the LORD.

^{xiii} **Titus 1:9 (ESV)**

⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

^{xiv} **Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

^{xv} **1 Thessalonians 5:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

^{xvi} **Revelation 2:4 (ESV)**

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

^{xvii} **Romans 8:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

^{xviii} **2 Corinthians 4:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

^{xix} **1 Peter 1:7 (ESV)**

⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

^{xx} **Revelation 2:5 (ESV)**

⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

^{xxi} **Mark 16:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.

^{xxii} **Matthew 28:19-20 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

^{xxiii} **Romans 12:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

^{xxiv} **Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)**

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,
⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

^{xxv} **Galatians 4:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you,

^{xxvi} **Luke 24:44 (ESV)**

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

^{xxvii} **1 Corinthians 3:6 (ESV)**

⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

^{xxviii} **2 Timothy 2:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

^{xxix} **Acts 17:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.