

15:36-18:23 - Paul's Second Missionary Journey (part 3)

Paul in Corinth – Acts 18:1-17

Acts 18 continues to describe the events associated with Paul's second missionary journey. Some of the towns that Paul had visited were relatively small and insignificant, but this could not be said of Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus. All three were leading cities in the Roman Empire.

Athens was the intellectual capital where Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno had expounded their philosophies. It had one of the most prestigious universities of antiquity (the other two were in Alexandria and Tarsus). It was relatively small, having only about 10,000 people when Paul was there.

Corinth was the commercial center of the Roman world. It was a city for seafarers on a major trade route. In the zenith of its time it had about three quarters of a million people.

Ephesus was also famed for its commerce, but it was also the capital of the province of Asia. Most significantly to us, it was one of the religious centers of the world. At one time it had three temples dedicated to the emperor. Ephesus had a population of about 500,000.

18:1 After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth.

After Paul's speech at the Areopagus (chapter 17), Paul went to Corinth. Silas and Timothy were in Macedonia (17:14) when Paul went to Athens, and although Paul had sent word for them to join him ((17:14-15), they did not meet him as planned (17:16; 1 Thess. 3:1). It wasn't until Paul was in Corinth that the missionary band reunited (18:5).

The Book of 1 Corinthians helps us to get a feel for Paul's mental state as he entered the city. In 1 Corinthians 2:2-3 Paul told the Corinthians, "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." Why would Paul feel this way?

Paul may have felt that way because he felt the great responsibility of his mission. But he may have felt inadequate because he saw no ability in himself to match the task he was called to do. He had no confidence in his flesh, no sense of personal ability or superior intellect. He saw himself at the mercy of God. Having no confidence in himself, he would soon face the people of Corinth who were intensely arrogant, idolatrous, and deeply immoral.

1) pride: The Corinthians gloried in that fact that they had had their city beautifully rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 46bc and boasted in their wealth and culture. The city had even taken the place of importance once held by Athens. 1 Corinthians often speaks of their intellectual arrogance (1 Cor. 1:26-31; 2:11; 3:18-21; 4:7-8).

2) idolatry: Idolatry is also given great attention in 1 Corinthians. Corinth was a city of many gods. The Greek pantheon was represented there. However, the most important religious influence at the

time was the imperial cult which worshipped imperial power as divine. This cult dominated the public arena (Garland, BECNT, 1 Cor., 10).

3) immorality: Furthermore, in those days the city of Corinth was almost synonymous with immorality just as Sodom and Gomorrah were. It had the temple of Aphrodite (or Venus), the goddess of love. "A thousand female slaves served her and roamed the city at night as prostitutes. The sexual promiscuity of Corinth was proverbial, so that [the verb] *korinthiazomai* meant to practice immorality, and [the noun] *korinthiastes* was a synonym for a harlot" (Stott, 296). Paul refers to the Corinthians' immorality in his letter to them as well (1 Cor. 5:1; 6:9, 18-20; 7:1-2).

Paul was well aware that these three things (pride, idolatry, immorality) were huge stumbling blocks to the gospel.

The gospel dismantles all human pride. It says that we are sinners who cannot buy or in any way contribute to our salvation. No wonder Paul comments in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 that it is difficult for the wise, prestigious, or powerful to accept the gospel.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29: "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, . . ."

Secondly, the gospel declares that Jesus alone is Lord. Paul said, "there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him" (1 Cor. 8:6). In a land where the emperor was declared to be god this message would not be well received.

Lastly, the gospel summons men and women to repentance and holiness, and warns them that the sexually immoral would not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9ff.)

No wonder Paul approached the city with fear and trembling.

18:2 And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them,

18:3 and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.

18:4 And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

18:5 But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

18:6 But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

Although Paul entered the city in weakness, God instantly encouraged him through Aquila and Priscilla whom Paul would come to call “fellow workers in Christ Jesus” and who would risk their own lives for him (Ro. 16:3, 4). They were Jews who had believed in Christ and had migrated to Corinth due to edicts that banished Jews from living in Rome (according to Suetonius in “The Life of Claudius” 25:4). Paul went to them because they were tent-makers like him. “Tent-maker” is a bit specific considering the semantic range of the word. It could be “leather-worker” or “cloth-worker,” possibly even referring to someone who made fabric used for rugs, clothing or tents (Stott, 297). Whatever the case may be, they worked with their hands.

Rabbis were all taught a trade since they were not allowed to ask for a fee for their services, so the fact that Paul was a tradesman was not unusual. Even though Paul knew he had the right to receive support from believers for his evangelistic work (I Cor. 9:14), he desired to support himself so that the gospel would be unhindered (1 Cor. 9:14ff; 2 Cor. 11:7 ff.). Thus, Paul worked during the week and reasoned with the Jews every Saturday in the synagogues (18:4). “When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, however, after staying in Berea (17:14) and visiting Thessalonica (1Thess. 3:2), they brought with them not only the good news of the Thessalonians’ faith and love (1Thess. 3:6), but also a [financial] gift (2 Cor. 11:8-9; Phil 4:14-17)” (Stott, 297). As a result, Paul was able to devote himself exclusively to preaching and testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ (18:5).

The response to Paul’s preaching was typical: some believed, and others resisted the word and blasphemed. Their rejection caused Paul to “shake out his garments” and say to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles” (18:6).

This imagery of shaking out one’s garments came from the custom of the Jews who, when coming back from gentile lands, would shake the dust off before re-entering Israel. It was “a symbolic token that the very soil of the country was defiling” (Furneaux quoted by Robertson, RWP). The act meant that Paul was abandoning them to go their own way. This was tantamount to regarding these Jews as pagan (Marshall, 245). In Acts 20:26-27 Paul says something similar: “Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.”

Paul saw his gospel ministry as a stewardship entrusted to him (I Cor. 9:17). However, he claimed no responsibility for their rejection of the gospel and the consequences that will come to them as a result (Your blood be on your own heads! – Acts 18:6).

18:7 Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue.

18:8 Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.

18:9 And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent;

18:10 for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city."

18:11 And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

The bold move to the house of Titius Justus that was next to the synagogue is more than just a geographical note. It means that Paul focused his evangelistic efforts in the private setting of homes rather than the public synagogue.

Although one might think that moving into a home that was next to the synagogue would be asking for trouble, Paul received a vision from God stating that he need not fear or keep silent. His move was immediately vindicated by God through the conversions and baptisms of many. After declaring that he would go to the Gentiles (18:6), Paul's first convert ends up being the ruler of the synagogue! He and his entire household believed and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul also believed and were baptized. This is a second means used by God to encourage Paul in his work.

The comment, "I have many people in this city" (18:10), is most probably a reference to God's foreknowledge of those would believe (Marshall, 313, Bock, 580). Bock points out similar comments in Acts: Acts 13:48 says, "as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." Acts 15:13-14 says, "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name." In all these verses God's knowledge of who He would save and His determination to save them preceded the people's salvation. This was a third means of encouragement and assurance to Paul that his evangelistic efforts would be rewarded. In other words, God had chosen many people in Corinth to be His, but for their salvation to come to pass they needed to hear the gospel. Therefore, God promised Paul protection so that those whom He had chosen could hear the gospel and believe.

18:12 But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat,

18:13 saying, "This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law."

18:14 But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you;

18:15 but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters."

18:16 And he drove them away from the judgment seat.

18:17 And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things.

According to verse 11, Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months; sometime during that period opposition arose again.

Eventually, the Jews rose up and brought Paul before the judgment seat to stand trial. The judgment seat, or the bema seat, was a large raised platform that was in the marketplace (the agora) in front of the residence of Gallio who was the proconsul (a governor of a province appointed for one year by the senate) at that time. Gallio was the younger brother of Seneca, the Stoic philosopher and tutor of Nero in his youth.

The Jews claimed that Paul's teaching was something new and un-Jewish; specifically, they said that Paul was persuading people to worship God contrary to the law (18:13). Gallio rightly understood that they were accusing him of breaking *their own* law (18:15), *not* Roman law. He thus refused to hear the case and had them ejected from the court (18:16).

Gallio proved to be just and true to the law and his decision fulfilled God's promise that no one would harm Paul. However, when the crowd took their anger out on Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, Gallio turned a blind eye to the violence. It is unknown who Sosthenes was (it is a very common name), but he may have been either a believer (possibly I Cor. 1:1?) or simply sympathetic toward Christians.

"Gallio's refusal to take the Jewish case seriously against Paul or to adjudicate was immensely important for the future of the gospel. In effect, he passed a favorable verdict on the Christian faith, and thus established a significant precedent. The gospel could not now be charged with illegality, for its freedom as a *religio licita* [an authorized religion] had been secured as the imperial policy. Luke's concluding comment is logical. Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time (18a), not now because of his vision of Jesus, but because of the judicial decision of Gallio. Jesus would keep his promise to protect him; the chief means of his protection would be Roman law" (Stott, 300).

18:18 Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow.

18:19 They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

18:20 When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent,

18:21 but taking leave of them and saying, "I will return to you again if God wills," he set sail from Ephesus.

18:22 When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch.

18:23 And having spent some time there, he left and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

Verses 18-23 are a very condensed description of Paul's travels. They summarize a 1500 mile trip where the destination was stated to be Syria (18:18).

The travel log begins with Paul going to Cenchreae, a Corinthian seaport seven miles southeast of the city. In Cenchreae Paul had his hair cut due to a vow he had taken. There are basically three positions as to what this vow was; however, the most likely is that Paul had taken a personal Nazirite vow (the view of the vast majority of commentators). This was a vow of consecration and self-imposed discipline for the purpose of some special service (Judg. 13:5-7; 16:17; Num. 6; Am. 2:11, 12). The length of the vow wasn't specified, but typically it lasted for a period of 30 days, although 60 day and 100 day vows could also be made (Christie, ISBE, "Nazirite"). The conditions of the vow entailed "(1) the strictest abstinence from wine and from every product of the vine; (2) the keeping of the hair uncut and the beard untouched by a razor; (3) the prohibition to touch a dead body; and (4) prohibition of unclean food"

(Judg. 13:5-7; Num. 6; Christie, ISBE, "Nazirite"). Typically, the Nazirite would complete this vow by cutting his hair in Jerusalem and burning it with a sacrifice as a symbol of self-offering to God (Stott, 300-301; Num. 6:18). However, cutting the hair outside of Jerusalem was also allowed (Bock, 585-586). In such cases the cut hair could be carried to Jerusalem and burned. This would fit well with the chronology of Paul's travels but it raises some questions as to what the early Jewish Christians continued to practice.

It should be remembered that Paul was living on the seam of two dispensations; he was on the line that divided two different eras. The practices and thinking of the Old Testament era were in the process of passing away as the New Covenant era was continuing to grow, transforming people's thoughts and behavior. Paul was a Jewish Christian. As a Christian he was no longer under the OT law. He wasn't restricted in what he ate. He wasn't obligated to celebrate the Jewish festivals. But he also had the freedom to practice and celebrate the customs of his Jewish heritage as long as they did not compromise the gospel of God's grace. In fact, his Jewish/Christian background allowed him to appreciate OT customs more fully. In light of the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ, he could see beyond the OT shadows to the meaning behind the practices. It is probable that many Jews continued to practice the Passover even after they had become Christians. They would offer the Paschal lamb knowing that it was symbolic of the Lamb of God who delivered them from God's judgment. Many continued to follow the dietary restrictions out of habit or personal preference even though there was no longer any reason to do so. Paul was a Jew to the Jews (1 Cor. 9:20). Even though Paul boldly proclaimed that circumcision was of no value (Gal. 5:2-11), in Acts 16 he had Timothy circumcised in order to avoid any possible offense to those to whom they would minister. Thus we can assume that Paul was free to take a Jewish vow if that was the most meaningful, natural way for him to express his devotion or thankfulness to God.

When they arrived in Ephesus Paul left Aquila and Priscilla (18:19) and began reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue. However, it is surprising to read that Paul declined the invitation to spend more time with them. Why would he not stay and teach in such an important city? Luke gives no answer, but it is reasonable to surmise that he had pressing business in Jerusalem or Antioch. Some speculate that Paul wanted to reach Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. If it was winter, only a handful of days were open at that time of year to sail this route so Paul would have to move quickly if he hoped to reach Jerusalem for the festival.

Paul then sailed from Ephesus to Caesarea, Israel's chief seaport about 65 miles from Jerusalem (see map below). Most believe that when Luke says "he went up and greeted the church" he was speaking about the church in Jerusalem, not the church in Caesarea. In both the Old and New Testaments Jerusalem was almost always considered "up" regardless of the direction one entered the city (2 Sam. 19:34; 1 Ki. 12:27, 28; 2 Ki. 12:17; 23:9; Ezra 1:3, 5; Isa. 2:3; Zech. 14:16, 17; Matt. 16:21; 20:17; Acts 8:26; 15:2; 21:12; 25:9; Gal. 1:17, etc.). Likewise, after his trip to Jerusalem it says that he went "down" to Antioch. Although Antioch was north, everything is considered "down" when leaving Jerusalem (Mk. 3:22; Lk. 10:30; Acts 11:27; 25:7).

This concluded Paul's second missionary journey.

The following summarizes Paul's travel in Acts 18.

- Athens >
- Corinth >
- Ephesus >
- Caesarea >
- Jerusalem >
- Syrian Antioch

