

Truth & Fervor

Acts 18:18-28 on September 5, 2021

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

Please read Acts 18:18-28 before going further in this transcript.

Acts 18:18 begins, “Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae¹ because of a vow he had taken.” Paul was in Corinth for a total of about 18 months.² When it says he sailed for Syria, this is a reference to his plan to return to Syrian Antioch, his sending church. In order to get there, he first needed to go over to Cenchreae, which was located on the Mediterranean coast, where he could hop on a boat. Before he sailed out though, Paul had his hair cut in connection to some vow that he’d taken. This was probably a temporary Nazirite vow, which we can read about back in Numbers 6. Be that as it may, at this time in history, vows were often taken to express thankfulness for deliverance from danger.³ We’re not given any more detail about this vow, but it could very well have been Paul’s way of thanking God for bringing him through his fearful time in Corinth. A few weeks ago we talked about how Paul felt afraid, back in Acts 18:9-10, and how the Lord encouraged him and promised to protect him.

Leaving from Cenchreae, one of the first stops on his voyage to Syria, was Ephesus. In other words, it wasn’t a direct route, but had some layovers along the way. Acts 18:19 continues, “They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.” When it says that Paul “left Priscilla and Aquila,” it doesn’t just mean that they didn’t go into the synagogue with Paul. What it’s saying is that Paul left them at Ephesus. In other words, they would be getting back on the boat with Paul, and then travel the rest of the way with him to Syria; instead, they STAYED in Ephesus. A few weeks ago, when we first met Priscilla and Aquila, in the first half of Acts 18, I mentioned that “God had gospel plans for their lives.” Very shortly, we will learn more about those particular gospel plans.

¹ “SEN kree uh” (Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In *That’s easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names* (p. 50). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

² See Acts 18:11.

³ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1863 footnote on Acts 18:18.

Before we learn about that though, let's look at an interesting situation that occurs in Ephesus, before Paul leaves. Acts 18:19-21 tells us that Paul "...went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus." Now, if you've been with us in this journey through the book of Acts, you know that very often Paul faces resistance from the Jews. Often, they persecuted him and even chased him out of town. But that's not the case this time. In fact, much the opposite, they ask him to stay! So, it seems strange that Paul didn't stay longer; why not? After all, not only was there a synagogue there that was receptive to his teaching, but Ephesus had as many as 250,000 people in it; it was one of the largest cities in the whole empire.⁴ It was a "Leading commercial city... the capital of provincial Asia and the [guardian] of the temple of Artemis."⁵ These should have all been incredibly compelling reasons for Paul to stay around, for a while longer. So, what's going on here? Has Paul LOST his spiritual fervor? Or is he simply worn down, and in need of some time to recharge back at his home church? Well, what's going on here is what verse 18 already told us, that Paul was bound for Syria, even before he arrived in Ephesus. Syria is where Syrian Antioch is located, as in the Antioch Church that had commissioned Paul for both of his missionary journeys so far. Apparently, Paul was convinced that it was time for him to go back and report to his sending church.⁶ Paul tells the Ephesians, "I will come back if it is God's will."⁷ So Paul's fervor hadn't decreased; instead, if anything, it seems that his sensitivity to doing God's will, had increased.⁸

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 586.

⁵ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1863 footnote on Acts 18:19.

⁶ Some scholars also suggest that maybe Paul was hoping to travel before the weather got too bad on the high seas, and also so that he could possibly make it to Jerusalem in time to celebrate the Passover (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 587). As a Jew, celebrating Passover would have been a meaningful opportunity for him, having been out on the road as an itinerant preacher for so many years.

⁷ This is how every fully devoted Christ-follower should pray: "Thy will be done." (See Matthew 6:10) James 4:13-15 reminds us, "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'" By the way, the James who wrote these words is the same James who was probably still leading the Jerusalem Church when Paul traveled through and greeted them at the end of his 2nd Missionary Journey in Acts 18:22.

⁸ I can't help but think back to times in Jesus' life, when His disciples wanted Him to stay in certain places because His popularity had grown so much, and things were going so well. Jesus had a daily

Well, Paul then set sail from Ephesus, leaving Priscilla and Aquila behind to carry on the ministry. The boat travels all the way over to the eastern edge of the Mediterranean, landing at Caesarea. Paul then goes up to greet the church in Jerusalem, and then goes to Antioch, where his 2nd Missionary Journey had begun. Now, it's easy to skip right past this, but Paul actually then begins His 3rd Missionary Journey. Acts 18:23 says, "After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples." Luke doesn't say anything about Paul giving a report to the church about his 2nd Missionary Journey, nor about him being sent out for a third time. In fact, in verses 22-23, Luke rushes through hundreds of miles of Paul's travels, but gives us almost no details. The one detail he is clear about though, is that Paul begins his 3rd Missionary Journey much like the 2nd one, he strengthens all the disciples from his 1st Missionary Journey. Paul had an ongoing concern for those he'd brought to faith in Christ. Clearly, he is deeply concerned that they continue to be spiritually healthy and growing in their faith.⁹

Well, despite how much we respect and admire Paul's ongoing, faithful ministry, Luke, the author of Acts, now reminds us of something worth noting: There is a ton of other solid, gospel work that is being done by many other believers. People other than the Apostle Paul.¹⁰ In fact, God had already long been preparing and training up other believers, who could now carry on the ministry in all of these various places where churches had been planted. Luke, the author of Acts, switches to this gospel reality rather suddenly in Acts 18:24, "*Meanwhile* a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures." "Alexandria...was...well known for its educational opportunities and as a place of philosophical reflection."¹¹ So Apollos was a well-educated person, who came from one of the premier educational places in the world. It might help us to think of places like Harvard or Princeton or Yale.

habit of praying and seeking His Father's will. Then, after talking with His Heavenly Father, He would do GOD'S will, rather than what may have made sense from a human point of view. For example, see Mark 1:32-39 and John 4:34.

⁹ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2259 footnote on Acts 18:23.

¹⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 590.

¹¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 591.

Alexandria also played a key role in the history of the Jewish people, specifically a key role in the study of the OT Bible. You see, there were many Jews who lived in Alexandria, but most of them no longer spoke or read Hebrew. They were now Greek speaking. The OT Hebrew Scriptures had been translated into Greek in a place nearby Alexandria.¹² This Greek translation of the OT Bible is known as the Septuagint or the LXX. The Septuagint translation had a MAJOR impact on the study of God's Word at this time in history because it made the OT Scriptures accessible to the Jews who were living outside of the Holy Land. In fact, not only did it make the OT accessible to the Greek speaking Jews, but also "to the entire Greek speaking world. [Ultimately the Septuagint translation became the Bible that was used by almost all of the Christians in the early church.]"¹³

Here's one key reason why this is such a big deal: All of Paul's missionary journeys were far away from the Holy Land, well beyond the region where people spoke or read Hebrew. The gospel was going forth in a mostly Greek speaking world. So, the opportunity to teach and preach from a Greek text, was an absolute game changer! Much like it's a game changer for our church today, to learn from an English Bible. Can you imagine if our church tried to preach and teach directly from the Hebrew text? (Imagine teaching the story of David and Goliath at Kids Church from the Hebrew Bible!)

Here's another way of explaining the significance of this: Paul was a Jew who had grown up in the Holy Land, and he'd been instructed in the OT scriptures in the Hebrew language. But Apollos was a Jew who'd grown up in the Greek speaking city of Alexandria. Verse 24 says he was "a native of Alexandria." So Alexandria is probably where Apollos was trained in the OT Scriptures, and where he received his instruction in "the way of the Lord."¹⁴ Verse 24 also says that he had a "thorough knowledge of the Scriptures," referring to the Septuagint translation. In other words, Apollos had a

¹² Luke's original audience would have likely known this distinctive about Alexandria.

¹³ See essay on "Literature" about the Septuagint on p. 1574 of *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

¹⁴ However, admittedly, we shouldn't be overly dogmatic about this since "It is not expressly stated...that Apollos received his accurate instruction in 'the way of the Lord' (i.e. the gospel) in his native Alexandria, but he may well have done so. The gospel certainly reached Alexandria at a very early date." F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts: Revised*, NICNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988, pp. 358-359.

particular expertise in this Greek translation of the Scriptures, and this appealed to his Greek speaking audiences in Ephesus and later Corinth.¹⁵
¹⁶ ¹⁷ (Corinth is located in the region of Achaia, where Apollos heads at the end of our passage.) Put another way, Apollos's background of growing up as a Hellenized Jew in Alexandria, put him one step closer to his Greek speaking audience than Hebrew trained teachers like Paul, or even Peter.

Acts 18:25-26 goes on, "He [Apollos] had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately." This "fervor" is referring to Apollos's enthusiasm and excitement; he was someone who was "on fire" for the Lord!¹⁸ This fervor came from the Holy Spirit within him.¹⁹ Despite this tremendous fervor though, and despite his impressive educational background and his "thorough knowledge of the Scriptures," Apollos's teaching was lacking something: he only knew the baptism of John the Baptist.²⁰ "Baptism in the name of Jesus, as proclaimed by Peter on the day of Pentecost [in Acts 2], was evidently unknown to him."²¹ Luke doesn't go into detail about what he is lacking here, but apparently it had

¹⁵ "the New Testament authors, most of the church fathers, and the Eastern Orthodox churches to this day have read the Greek rather than the Hebrew as the normative Old Testament of their Christian Bible." (Quoting Markus Bockmuehl, "Introduction," in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 8. See <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-septuagint-and-biblical-theology/> for *Themelios: Vol. 41, Issue 2*, "The Septuagint and Biblical Theology" by W. Edward Glenny.)

¹⁶ The Septuagint translation "was in large part the OT of the early church at the time the NT was written." (See <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-septuagint-and-biblical-theology/> for *Themelios: Vol. 41, Issue 2*, "The Septuagint and Biblical Theology" by W. Edward Glenny.)

¹⁷ The Septuagint (LXX) "is a bridge or link between the Christian OT and NT.... Then as the writers of the NT refer to and quote those Hebrew Scriptures, often in their Greek translation, the LXX provides the form of the OT promise that Christ fulfills in the NT, providing a link between the Hebrew Scriptures and the NT." (See <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-septuagint-and-biblical-theology/> for *Themelios: Vol. 41, Issue 2*, "The Septuagint and Biblical Theology" by W. Edward Glenny.)

¹⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 591. ζέω [fervor] = "to be stirred up emotionally, be enthusiastic/excited/on fire." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 426). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

¹⁹ In fact, this is the same kind of fervor that we find in Romans 12:11, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord."

²⁰ See Mark 1:4.

²¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts: Revised*, NICNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988, p. 359.

something to do with Apollos only teaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, like the Apostle John had done. In other words, Apollos wasn't baptizing new believers in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In some way or another, Apollos's understanding of Jesus was accurate, but not accurate enough. This may have even been connected to a limited view of the Holy Spirit.²² Likely, Priscilla and Aquila explained to him that the Holy Spirit had come at Pentecost and that the OT prophecy from Joel 2 had been fulfilled: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people...And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."²³

Be that as it may, Priscilla and Aquila decide to step in and fill in the blanks, by explaining to Apollos where his understanding was inadequate.²⁴ ²⁵ They weren't belittling his education or calling him unintelligent, they were simply bringing him up to speed on a particular theological blind spot. Much to his credit, this well-educated man was still teachable.²⁶ Some of us will recall that back in verse 3 it says Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers by trade. They were leather workers, who worked with their hands doing manual labor. As a highly educated and intelligent person, Apollos could have responded with indignation: "What do you uneducated tentmakers possibly think that you have to teach me!" Instead though, he humbly receives their counsel.

Last Sunday we talked about the importance of both humility and gentleness. Humility is how we think about ourselves. Gentleness is how we treat others. Apparently, Apollos was humble enough to be teachable, and Priscilla and Aquila were gentle enough in the way they treated him, that

²² See *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1863 footnote on Acts 18:25.

²³ See discussion in Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 593.

²⁴ The word "explained" in verse 26 means to "fill someone in on something" they're not aware of. Referencing BAGD, Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 593.

²⁵ "Explained" (ἐκτίθημι) = "to convey information by careful elaboration, explain, expound." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 310). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

²⁶ Kevin DeYoung describes Apollos as a teacher willing to be taught. Kevin DeYoung and Chris Ranson, *Acts: A Visual Guide*, Sermon #44: "A More Accurate Way," Christian Focus Publications, Scotland, 2018, based on Acts 18:12-18. <https://www.avisualguide.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/44.-A-More-Accurate-Way.mp3>

their counsel was well-received.²⁷ Much to their credit, Priscilla and Aquila approached Apollos kindly and gently, inviting him into their home where they could talk privately, rather than correcting him publicly.^{28 29} Their hearts were in the right place of sincerely wanting the best for him and his ministry, so they help this fellow believer by filling in a knowledge gap, where his understanding was inadequate in some way.

This begs two questions:

Are we humble enough to be teachable?

Are we gentle enough when we teach others?

Perhaps there's an area of our own Christian faith where we could really use some additional instruction. If so, let's try to be teachable and find ways to shore up that particular area of our faith. There are many ways of doing this including joining a Bible study or a Life Group, or by asking a fellow believer to recommend a good book or online resource that might be of help to us. Perhaps there's a fellow Christian who we've been teaching or advising in some area of their life. Let's make sure to be gentle with them, ESPECIALLY if we're trying to help them see an area where they have a blind spot, or an inadequate understanding of something.

Acts 18:27-28 concludes, "When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia [i.e. Corinth], the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah."³⁰ The driving motivation behind all of these gospel partnerships is the very gospel itself. It's working together to correctly teach the Scriptures and give people a better understanding of who Jesus really is. Apollos, and Priscilla and Aquila, and all of the disciples in these various churches, have a humble, God-honoring awareness that this gospel task is "bigger than any one of them.... This kind of mutual cooperation and encouragement, in

²⁷ In other words, they decide to teach Apollos with gentle sensitivity, in the privacy of their own home. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 593.

²⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts: Revised*, NICNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988, p. 360.

²⁹ Last Sunday we talked about Proverbs 15:1, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

³⁰ In Acts 18:28, this word here "refuted" means to "'overwhelm' someone in an argument." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 593.

pursuit of a theologically faithful ministry, enables the church to carry out its mission” with both TRUTH & FERVOR!^{31 32}

Consider these words that Paul will later write to the Corinthian Church in 1 Corinthians 3:5-6, 9, “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow....For **we are co-workers in God’s service**....” Brother or Sister in Christ, let’s learn from these examples in the Early Church. Let’s learn how we can be better partners together for the gospel. As fully devoted followers of Jesus, let’s agree to strive together toward a God-honoring balance of “Truth & Fervor.”

³¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 594.

³² Acts 18:28 describes Apollos’ gospel ministry exactly in line with Paul’s gospel ministry earlier in verse 5. In verse 5, Paul “devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.” (See also Acts 9:22) In verse 28, Apollos “vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.”