

TOGETHER

Acts 18:1-11,18-21

It had been about twenty years since the crucifixion of Jesus and the gospel message was reaching beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. There were groups of believers in several cities and towns in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire and Paul and Silas were led to go further west into what we know as Europe and declare the gospel message to both Jews and Gentiles. There were already some people in that area of the world who had heard about what had happened in Jerusalem two decades ago since a fairly large number of Jews who lived Europe had been in Jerusalem during the Pentecost festival following the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. It was also likely that some believers from Christian groups in Asia Minor had traveled to places like Rome and shared information about what God was doing in places like Antioch of Syria.

We have read about how some Jews and some Gentiles opposed the message of the gospel in places that Paul and Silas had visited and history records that in Rome the opposition by some in the Jewish community to those who shared the gospel message about the Messiah having come was so intense that all the Jews were ordered by the emperor to leave Rome. That development had already occurred before Paul arrived in Athens during his second missionary trip. Things were happening in various areas and not everyone had the full gospel account at that time. There were a lot of assumptions and incomplete information and misinformation.

After Paul had spoken to the Greek philosophers in Athens, he determined to focus mainly on the meaning of the crucifixion and to present the Gospel in simple terms. He left Athens and went to Corinth which was a major city of approximately 200,000 people. Corinth was known for wickedness and since it was an important commerce center there were many different cultural influences from the many people who travel through and live in that region.

Build Relationships – 18:1-4

¹ After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² 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, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. Acts 18:1–4 (ESV)

Paul had shared the Gospel with those in the major cultural centers of the western and middle eastern world. He, nor the Gospel, received a very good hearing especially in Athens. The message of God's salvation is foolishness to those who perish. It is not logical to the natural mind. Man, left to his own devices, would never have figured out God's plan. Therefore, God had to reveal it and it must be revealed again and again to everyone who will be saved. Having left the western cultural center (Athens), Paul then went to one of the commerce centers of the world (Corinth).

Paul was alone in his attempt to share the gospel in Athens and the response he received from the people there was discouraging. We learn from the letter that he later wrote to the church at Corinth that he was "in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling" when he arrived in Corinth. As we know he was still alone (when he arrived in Corinth) since Silas and Timothy had remained in Berea (1 Corinthians 2:3).

Paul had tried to approach the intellectuals in Athens with philosophical arguments and that was not very effective in that environment of those who thought themselves to be the paragons of philosophical thought. He then moved into an area that was less noble in that many

in the area of Corinth were into materialism, hedonism, and worship at the temple of Aphrodite. The commonality of both areas was that the people there were in opposition to the message of the Kingdom of God. In Corinth, Paul did not attempt to adapt his message to what was popular in that area but resolved to go back to the basics of Christ dying for the sins of humanity.

We might assume that Paul encountered Aquila and his wife in the synagogue in Corinth. We don't know if these two people were already believers when they met Paul. Some commentaries suggest that they were already believers and that they assembled a group of believers (church) in Rome before they relocated to Corinth. Others think that Aquila and Priscilla became believers after they met Paul and were associated with him. They were originally from an area just north of Bithynia which was north of the province of Asia. They had apparently relocated to Rome (Italy) because of their business but had to leave because some of the Jews in Rome had caused public disturbances when arguing with other Jews regarding Christ. This expulsion happened in AD 49.

We see evidence of the practicality of Paul. He needed companionship which he found in friendship with Aquila and Priscilla, he needed a base of operation which he found in the home of these new friends, and he needed a mean of financial support which he found in helping them make tents. Having taken care of these practical needs, Paul then began laying the preliminary work of introducing the gospel to the Jews and Greek in the area of Corinth. He did this each Sabbath in the synagogue in Corinth. We don't know how long this approach lasted but apparently continued until Silas and Timothy caught up with Paul in Corinth.

Share the Gospel – 18:5-11

⁵ When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶ 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." ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. 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." ¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. Acts 18:5-11 (ESV)

Based on the text of Luke's account and information that Paul himself provided in the letter he wrote later on that he was being cautious when he first arrived in Corinth. However, a shift seems to have occurred when Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia as we see in the fifth verse of chapter eighteen. Various translations render the second half of verse five in different ways. Some say he was "occupied with the word," he was "preaching fervently," he was "pressed in the spirit," he was "constrained by the word," he "devoted himself exclusively to teaching," and he was "compelled by the Spirit." The objective of all this urging and zeal was to make known the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ promised in the Scriptures and that He had fulfilled the promise to be the One Who would be the means of salvation for all humanity.

What Paul was doing in verse four was laying the foundational groundwork for the monumental truth that was revealed in verse five. One important factor that influenced Paul's change in direction and increased boldness was the arrival of Silas and Timothy. They brought good news that the Thessalonica believers were "steadfast in their belief" and that the groups of believers in Macedonia had sent financial assistance to help the missionary effort. This eased the financial burden and it also eased Paul's emotional burden by providing encouragement that the work that had begun in Macedonia was bearing fruit.

Apparently, the non-believing Jews were content with Paul's teaching about the coming of the Messiah as presented in the Old Testament and they were themselves looking forward to that event. However, when Paul shifted gears and told them that the Messiah had already come and now was the time to put their trust in what God had done through Jesus of Nazareth, they vigorously opposed Paul and became abusive. Apparently, it is easier to believe in what we think will happen in the future as opposed to believing and acting upon what has already occurred.

Eventually, Paul backed away from trying to convince the unbelieving Jews in Corinth. It was apparently evident that the more Paul reasoned with them, the more obstinate they became. When that happens, then wisdom would tell us that we have done all we can do at this time and consider the past efforts to be like planting a seed that needs time to germinate. It was Paul's passion to win his fellow countrymen to Christ; however, it was God calling for him to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

Instead of going to the synagogue to declare the message of God's salvation, Paul began teaching in the home of one of the proselytes that had been attending the synagogue. As it happened, his house was located adjacent to the synagogue. Of course, not all the Jews rejected the good news and, in particular, the leader of the synagogue in Corinth believed the message and was baptized.

When we fail to accomplish our goals, we can become discouraged. Paul had many disappointments since he wanted his fellow Israelites to trust in Jesus and be saved and most of them rejected the Gospel. There were victories and some did believe. We must learn to celebrate the gains and avoid grieving over losses of that which we never possessed.

In addition to finding rejection from those with whom he identified, there were the ever-present threats of physical harm from those who opposed what Paul was preaching. Both these situations had the potential to be very discouraging to a person especially after the rejection that Paul had experienced immediately before arriving in Corinth. Those who were opposing Paul were, in fact, opposing God and God took the initiative to give Paul a word of encouragement in a night vision. The message was simple and to the point: keep on doing what I called you to do and you will have success because there are many in Corinth who are seeking salvation. The work to which God had called Paul was so significant that special encouragement was needed to ensure that discouragement did not creep in and hinder the work. Sometimes we want to quit when we have the slightest resistance and everyone doesn't enthusiastically endorse what we are doing. If we are doing the right thing, then we must press on even if no one agrees.

Another significant part of the vision message was regarding fear. The reason that Paul did not need to fear was because God was with Paul. Paul later wrote about that connection in his letter to the church at Rome where he wrote, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Apparently, Paul took God's encouragement to heart for he continued in Corinth for a total of eighteen months even though the Jews continued to make trouble for Paul and the group of believers whom he was teaching. Luke wrote that the Jews made a "united attack on Paul and took him to court." Paul had God's promise that no one was going to attack him, but the unbelieving Jews tried. However, they were not successful. They charged that Paul was "persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law." The court essentially refused to hear the case since it seemed to the court to simply be a Jewish religious dispute rather than an issue with Roman law. Bottom line, even though Paul was attacked, no harm came to him.

Follow the Lord's Lead – 18:18-21

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. 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. ²¹ But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus. Acts 18:18–21 (ESV)

After the abortive attempt by the Jews to get the local government in Corinth to stop Paul from preaching and teaching the Jewish and Gentile believers in that area, Paul continued there for many days. After a year and a half in Corinth, Paul left that area to eventually return to Antioch of Syria.

Luke included mention that Paul got a haircut in the port city of Cenchreae that was near Corinth. Apparently, Paul had taken a vow to not cut his hair (and likely to not drink any wine) for a period of time as a way of disciplining himself and showing consecration to faithfully press on in the work to which God had called him. This was (apparently) a fairly common practice among devout Jews when they encountered difficult situations or decisions in life. We don't know the details of why he had taken the vow. Typically, a vow was for a period of thirty days but it could have been longer. The occasion for the vow could have been that Paul was seeking to know God's will regarding how much longer he should remain in Corinth. The typical practice when the time of the vow was over was to shave one's head and then offer the hair as a burnt offering.

Aquila and Priscilla left with Paul and their first stop along the way was at Ephesus in the province of Asia. They were still a long way from Antioch. Aquila and Priscilla stayed in Ephesus and Paul moved on after he spent some time reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue in Ephesus. Apparently, he and his message were well received by the Jews in that area since they asked him to stay with them for additional time.

We see from later verses that Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem, perhaps, for a feast that was coming up on the Jewish religious calendar. After promising to come back to Ephesus (the Lord willing), he traveled on to Caesarea and then made his way over land to Jerusalem before returning to Antioch which completed his second missionary journey. Apparently, Paul had made a significant discovery during his ministry effort and it was that he could not always count on his plans being aligned with what God wanted him to do. Paul had learned to be open and flexible in order to be responsive to how God would lead him.

Some of the lessons for us might include that persistence pays off, we should not let discouragement keep us from sharing our faith, we need to prayerfully consider how much time we spend on those who are solidly entrenched in their unbelief, we need to prioritize efforts on those who are likely to accept Christ, which means that we should always be prepared to share the Gospel, and keep in mind that sharing our faith is not optional.