

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 24 August 2003

No. T0280

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Acts 18:23-21:16 - The third missionary journey

Looking back over the book of Acts, there is a gradual, sometimes arduous, transition from Jewish belief to the faith of Christianity. However, the Christian Gospel had reached to the Gentiles with a fair measure of success. This third missionary journey begins with Paul visiting churches which God had set up through his labours in Galatia and Phrygia, with a view to strengthening the disciples. This was Paul's way of working and we need to think hard about this in our day. In this section of Acts, we take a considerable move forward. It is the work of the apostle Paul which is mainly in view. Added to this, Ephesus comes into the picture as the centre of his activities.

In spite of what has been said, how interesting that we start off by being introduced to a certain Jew named Apollos who came to Ephesus. He did not come from Judea but was born at Alexandria. He is said to be an eloquent man, mighty in the Old Testament scriptures and instructed in the way of the Lord; but he only knew of the baptism of John. This is the servant whom we know of as John the Baptist, referred to in the Old Testament as *"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD"* (Isaiah 40:3). John called upon men to repent and urged all to be baptised. In fact, he even baptised the Lord Jesus in the river Jordan. But Apollos didn't know about the cross and how the blood of Jesus had been shed to bring forgiveness to all men. Therefore there were defects in the preaching of this servant. He didn't know the full Gospel as we know it today. However, there was a Christian husband and his wife who had recently moved from Corinth to Ephesus, named Aquila and Priscilla. They had become acquainted with the apostle Paul while they lived at Corinth and he lodged with them. Because they were tentmakers, as Paul was, they worked together.

There is no indication in the Acts that this godly couple were Christians before they met Paul, so we cannot speculate. One thing is certain, they would have been under the influence of Paul's teaching. They would be instructed in the Gospel in its completeness. When Apollos came to Ephesus and this godly pair listened to his speaking they found there was something missing. Let's listen to what is said, *"when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly"*. There is a wonderful example here of believers helping one another in love. We would do well to take this example to heart, even though it was in a roundabout way that the influence of Paul was felt at Ephesus. Apollos then felt disposed to pass on to Corinth. The Christians therefore wrote exhorting those at Corinth to receive him. When he came, he was a great encouragement to those who had already believed the Gospel.

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul came to Ephesus again. His last visit had been brief. Strange as it might seem, he found something very similar to what Aquila and Priscilla had to deal with. There were certain disciples there and Paul enquired of them, *"Have ye received the Holy Spirit since ye believed?"* The answer they gave was, *"We did not even hear if the Holy Spirit was come"* (JN Darby translation). They were in the same situation as Apollos. They had been baptised with John's baptism unto repentance but had no knowledge of the cross, resurrection or the ascension of Jesus. This gave Paul the opportunity to open out to them the whole Gospel of the grace of God. When they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul, having then laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them. These disciples were now Christians and were the beginning of the church at Ephesus of which we hear so much in the New Testament.

The apostle's love for his own people, the Jews, led him to begin his labours in the synagogue. In Paul's letter to the Romans he makes this purpose clear. Writing of his zeal in preaching the Gospel he says, *"to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile"*. Therefore he adopted this line at Ephesus, speaking boldly for three months, disputing with the Jews. There was little response and no faith. To this was added their animosity to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus. Paul then felt obliged to remove the new believers and took over the school of Tyrannus as his preaching centre. A further step was therefore taken in the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Ephesus stands out signally in the ongoing process. The work continued for two years and turned out to be an outstanding work. It extended from Ephesus itself so that *"all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord, Jesus, both Jews and Greeks"*. Paul gives evidence of this in his letter to the Colossians. He makes mention of a believer whose name is Epaphras who had been the means of their conversion and the setting up of a church at Colossae. This serves as an illustration of the way the word spread into all Asia. Even the miracles performed by Paul in Ephesus were different and much more startling. We are left in no doubt as to the importance of the work at Ephesus as to the advance of God's purpose to reach the Gentiles.

However, we soon learn of an evil more subtle than unbelief that was encountered. There was superstition and association with evil spirits. This was to be expected among the Gentiles. An account is given in chapter 19 of the excesses to which they could go. As a result of this happening, God showed Himself in mighty power and there was an outstanding triumph of the Gospel, *"and many that believed came, and confessed and shewed their deeds"*. Others brought their books of curious arts and black magic and burnt them before all men. The price of these books was found to be fifty thousand pieces of silver. How good it is to see faith coupled with practical evidence. They had changed their values! This is the way it should be! Scripture says, *"faith without works is dead"* (James 2:20). Do actions like this not gladden your heart? Wouldn't we like to see it happening today?! It is here we have a most wonderful statement made! ***"So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed."*** This verse has been described as a progress point in the book of Acts. Things that are dead don't grow; the word of God is alive and its power remains unchanged today. *"The gospel ... is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth"* (Romans 1:16). Have you believed in the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ who gave His life that you might have this great salvation?

Paul now has thoughts of moving on from Ephesus towards Jerusalem, which was never far from his mind. He had a gift to be taken for the believers there who were passing through difficult circumstances. He had collected this gift from the Gentile churches, giving evidence of the fellowship that existed between the believers of differing nationalities in those early days of the Church. However, the apostle's sights were still further on. So it is his intention to go to Jerusalem saying, *"After I have been there, I must also see Rome"*. To Paul, this was a must! Nothing could deter this ardent servant in his mission to take the Gospel further on. He loved to refer to the *"regions beyond"*. Further west was one of his ambitions even to Spain. He writes in Romans 15:20, *"So have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation"*.

The Apostle then sent two of his fellow labourers on into Macedonia, while he himself stayed on in Asia for a season. It seems that it was the will of God that he should do so. It wasn't long before there was *"no small stir about that way"*. This is not the first time the expression *"the way"* occurs in the narrative in the book of Acts; it is the Christian way. It is the way the Lord Jesus taught and lived when He was here on earth. You may remember His own words, *"I am the way"*. The problem Paul faced this time wasn't to do with superstition and evil spirits it was idolatry. This was prevalent among the Gentile nations; Paul had already dealt with it at Athens. However, this wasn't the only matter at Ephesus to be faced. A man called Demetrius, a silversmith by trade, found that his profits were falling. He evidently had a lucrative business making silver shrines for the goddess Diana for the tourist trade. Everyone who visited Ephesus would buy a souvenir. As Paul preached that idols made by men were nothing, many therefore gave up their idols and so the profits fell. Demetrius called together the craftsmen and silversmiths and they had a meeting about this problem. Very up to date isn't it? We in our day would have called it a trade union meeting and so there was an uproar and great anger saying with one voice, *'Great is Diana of the Ephesians'*. Eventually the whole city was in confusion. In the end God protected His servants using the powers that be. The town clerk quietened the uproar and Paul and the others were free to leave Ephesus unharmed.

Acts 20 starts off, *"And when the uproar was ceased, Paul called unto him the disciples and embraced them, and departed for to go into Macedonia."* How encouraging it is to see the affection that Paul had for those who were the fruit of his labours at Ephesus. This is the mark of true discipleship. Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, *"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another"* (John 13:35). The early verses of chapter 20 are taken up with the various journeys and calls made by the apostle. Wherever he went, his time was spent giving much encouragement to the believers. He was never idle! Eventually Paul sailed away from Philippi and came to Troas, meeting up with the others who had waited for them there. The voyage to Troas took five days. There is an added interest here. Luke appears in the narrative as being with the apostle. This is one of a number of passages in Acts which writers have referred to as 'we' passages.

Seven days were spent at Troas. No doubt Paul would be stirred, remembering the occasion when he had first crossed into Europe. Here at Troas we learn of one of the activities of the early Christians. Let's listen to Acts 20:7, *"And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread."* This seems to have been their usual practice. How important it is to see it done among Gentile believers. The mention of the first day of the week means that they had learned that Christianity had its foundation upon the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. How thankful we ought to be that this ordinance has been passed down to our day. Believers call it by different names, but there was an appeal made to us all by the Lord Jesus Himself two thousand years ago, *"This do in remembrance of me"*. Let's never forget the day when the women came to the empty tomb and the words of the angel, *"He is not here: for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay."* Before they broke bread in Troas, Paul preached to the believers and continued until midnight. In our day we are very critical about preachers who speak for a long time, but let's not forget that Paul would never have another opportunity to do this with them so he made the most of it. Here we are told of a certain young man called Eutychus who fell asleep and fell to the ground while Paul was speaking. He was sitting in a window on the third story and was taken up dead. It was Paul who went down and in a miraculous way restored him to life and all were comforted. When Paul had come up again, and they had broken bread and eaten and talked until break of day, he departed.

From Troas the next journey to be made was to Miletus. This was done in stages, part of which Paul had decided to travel on foot. Paul was so determined to be in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost that he decided to sail by Ephesus. This must have been a hard decision to come to. It was about 30 miles to Ephesus from Miletus. However, he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church that, through them, he might pass on a message to the believers there. It was Paul's custom in every place that he visited, preaching the Gospel, that he founded a church and then appointed some among them to be shepherds and overseers. Not just one but many. In a measure this practice is still carried on in our day. It is a very responsible service. When the elders came to him he addressed them with words of encouragement and needful advice. What comes through in his address is not so much what he had taught them, but the manner in which he had behaved among them. *"Serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews."* It hadn't been all giving lectures in the school of Tyrannus, *"...but have shewed you, and taught you publicly, and from house to house."* The many things he had taught them are summed up in these words, *"for I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God."*

There was also a personal message for these elders. Let's listen to part of this, *"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He has purchased with the blood of His Own And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them that are sanctified."* How much we need this kind of encouragement in our day!

Their parting is very affecting, *"And they all wept sore and fell on Paul's neck, and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words he spake, that they should see his face no more."*

As we reach the end of our broadcast today, all that remains to be said concerns the journey Paul made to Jerusalem. At every place he was warned not to go, but he would not be persuaded. Paul's love for his own people, the Jews, was very strong. At one point the believers could only say, *"The will of the Lord be done"* Let's pray that in our times we might be guided by the will of the Lord and be imitators, in some measure, of Paul as he was of the Lord Jesus.

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