

**Text:** Ac 18.18-23

**Proposition:** Activity in ministry must aim to advance the Kingdom.

We continue with the last bits of Acts 18. Paul's ministry to Corinth closes, he takes step for a new ministry in Ephesus, "if God wills."

Last week we talked about the involvement of lay people — Aquila and Priscilla — in the new ministry.

This week, I want to look at a different idea concerning these first steps in Ephesus. I want us to consider the steps Paul took in preparing for his own ministry in Ephesus, which would come later, in Acts 19.

Paul's actions underscore his Jewishness, his "Jew first" strategy, his dependence on God, and his constant look towards the future for his ministry.

His position is unique in history. We have converted Jews today, of course, and there are numerous ministries focused directly on preaching to the Jews. We praise God for them. However, the work of the church became primarily Gentile in the providence of God after the first steps of the church among Judaism in the first century.

In a sense, it is almost as if God offered the Jews of the first century one last chance to be gathered into the church, after which only gleanings came in. According to prophecy, there remains one more great harvest from Judaism, but that is in the future.

So, what can we learn from considering the steps Paul takes as he prepares for Ephesus?

- We need to do what we can to open doors instead of closing them.
- We need to depend on God for all our efforts, today and in the days to come.
- We need to press forward every step of the way in our ministry, though we depend on God, God works when we work.

Read Acts 18.18-23

**Proposition:** Activity in ministry must aim to advance the Kingdom.

## I. Knocking on Jewish doors (18-21a)

### A. Participating in a (presumably) Jewish vow (18)

1. There is a question about this vow, what was Paul doing?

- a. a Nazirite vow
- b. a simple vow of thanksgiving for God's protection
- c. or an imitation of a Greek vow of thanksgiving that sailors took after a tough journey
- d. or this is something Luke just made up<sup>1</sup>

We can confidently dismiss the last suggestion, and likely dismiss the "Greek vow" suggestion — it seems inconceivable for the spiritually minded apostle.

Commentators tend to divide over the first two options.

## 2. The Nazirite vow

- a. Recorded in Num 6.1-21 — a few highlights

- 1) The hair

Num 6.5 ¶ 'All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall pass over his head. He shall be holy until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD; he shall let the locks of hair on his head grow long.'

- 2) The shaving

Num 6.19 'The priest shall take the ram's shoulder *when it has been* boiled, and one unleavened cake out of the basket and one unleavened wafer, and shall put *them* on the hands of the Nazirite after he has shaved his dedicated *hair*.'

- b. Understanding the process

- 1) The vow was open to any Israelite
- 2) The vow was a commitment to abstain from certain worldly involvements (but not by withdrawing from society)

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<sup>1</sup> Suggested by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 586.

- a) Abstain from wine and *all* fruit of the vine: grapes, grape juice, raisins
  - b) Abstain from cutting the hair
  - c) Abstain from touching any dead body (if touched, process to “restart” the vow)
- 3) The vow lasted typically for 30 days, could be doubled or trebled (rarely individuals were consecrated as lifelong Nazirites: Samson, Samuel, John the Baptist)
- 4) At the end of the period, rituals followed
- a) Offer a burnt offering, sin offering, peace offering, meal offering, and a drink offering
  - b) Shave the head, offer the hair on the burning offerings on the altar
3. Other vows
- a. Leviticus 27 talks about vows in general
  - b. If God blessed someone, or they wanted to make a personal commitment, the Israelites could commit to a personal vow
4. The debate: Nazirite or personal
- a. In favor of the Nazirite is the hair cut
  - b. In favor of a personal vow is the location:

“This was probably not a formal Nazirite vow, which could not properly be undertaken outside the Holy Land, but a private vow, the fulfilment of which was an act of thanksgiving—possibly for the divine promise of verse 10, which had been confirmed by his preservation from harm throughout his Corinthian ministry.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 355.

“A passage in Josephus seems to indicate the practice of cutting the hair elsewhere before going to Jerusalem to make the sacrifices. Perhaps this is what Paul was doing.”<sup>3</sup>

- If a Nazirite vow, Paul would save the cut hair and take it to Jerusalem to complete the vow.
- In any case, it seems that the vow reflects Paul’s Jewishness – more later.

## B. Dialoguing in the Jewish synagogue (19)

1. In Ephesus, Paul went to the synagogue and “reasoned with the Jews”

“The verb διαλέγομαι (*dialegomai*, debate) is common in the second part of Acts, where it refers either to giving a discourse or to debating, depending on the context (17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8–9; 20:7, 9; 24:12, 25). ... [in Corinth it] suggests debate in the synagogue.”<sup>4</sup>

2. Paul’s practice is always to go to the Jew first in any community he encounters for the first time
  - a. As seen in the book of Acts
  - b. As testified in Romans

Rm 1.16 ¶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

## 3. The Jews in Ephesus

- a. A large community of Jews in Ephesus
- b. Reason: special status, granted by emperors
  - 1) First, in 44bc by a connection of Julius Caesar

<sup>3</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 390.

<sup>4</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 578.

2) Later, confirmed by a series of civil authorities and even Augustus Caesar himself

c. The large community of Jews in Ephesus was another reason Paul wanted to go to Ephesus at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey

1) As we mentioned last week, God had other plans

2) Brought Luke into the network, and Aquila and Priscilla

3) But now, God allows Paul's visit to Ephesus

So, at last, Paul comes to the great synagogue at Ephesus, with a new haircut!

C. Planning to return to the Jewish synagogue (20-21a)

1. The reception is favorable: "they asked him to stay for a longer time" (20)

2. He did not consent, but agreed to return if God willed (21)

3. KJV adds a phrase

<sup>KJV</sup> Act 18:21 But bade them farewell, saying, **I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem:** but I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus.

a. The phrase comes from the Western manuscripts and is included in the Byzantine manuscripts

b. Obviously, the NAU and others don't think it is original, but commentators make this remark:

"It may well be the explanation for his departure, whether or not it belongs in the original text."<sup>5</sup>

The urgency for the departure may also be connecting with completing the vow – he wants to get to Jerusalem, but hopes to return.

<sup>5</sup> Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Jerusalem to Rome: Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1972), 145.

4. But this brings us to the “Jewishness” of the apostle
  - a. Through his ministry among Gentiles, he gave up the religious reasons for maintaining Jewishness
  - b. Yet he persisted in living out his Jewishness for another reason: access to the Jews of the synagogues

Earlier, I asked what we can learn from this: here is the first thing

- We need to do what we can to open doors instead of closing them.

For us, we don’t need to adopt Jewishness, or “worldliness,” but we need to do what we can to gain an entrance to speak to people in our world.

We want to open doors

*That was a lengthy point 1. I will be much shorter on points 2 and 3*

## II. Depending on Divine favor (21b)

A. Paul’s promise to return “if God wills”

1. Everything Paul did depended on God’s will
2. There were many adversaries; God had promised him Corinth, but not Ephesus (as yet)
3. Paul lived and ministered in submission to the will of God

B. Our ministry likewise depends on God’s will

Lesson two from our passage: We need to depend on God for all our efforts, today and in the days to come.

1. We wish to convert people in our town to Christ
2. We wish to build up our church and the people in it to the glory of God

It all depends on God’s will.

None of us have had any difficulty with the coronavirus, but in other places many people have had it — many friends of mine, including one who died from it.

If God wills...

### III. Persisting in speaking the Word (22-23)

#### A. Paul's movements (22)

1. He landed in Caesarea (Herod's seaport in Palestine)
2. He went "up" to the church (*i.e.* Jerusalem, it is always "up" to Jerusalem)
3. He went "down" to Antioch and spent some time there

Presumably, if he participated in a Nazirite vow, he now completed it.

Presumably, in Jerusalem and Antioch, he reported on the work of the Lord during his second journey

#### B. Paul's persistence (23)

1. And then he set out on his third missionary journey
2. He took time crossing Turkey on foot again, going to the churches of the first missionary journey: Galatia and Phrygia
  - a. Included Derbe
  - b. Lystra
  - c. Iconium
  - d. Antioch
3. His purpose: strengthening the disciples (how? By speaking the Word)

Third lesson from this passage: We need to press forward every step of the way in our ministry, though we depend on God, God works when we work.

#### Conclusion:

Now our passage doesn't contain much "significant" detail – just "travel notes" in a sense.

- No sermons
- No miracles
- Just incidentals along the way from Corinth to Ephesus to Jerusalem and back again

What do we gain from it?

**Proposition:** Activity in ministry must aim to advance the Kingdom.

What do you aim for in the activity in your Christian life? Are you advancing the Lord's kingdom?