Sermon Transcript - Acts 18:18-28

Okay, if you would please turn to the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 18. I will be reading Acts Chapter 18 verses 18 through 28.

“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. And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. But on taking leave of them he said, “I will return to you if God wills,” and he set sail from Ephesus.

When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.”

Blessed is the reading of God's holy, infallible, inerrant, historical and instructive word to our hearts, to our minds, and to our walk with Christ. Let’s pray. We thank you, Father, for the gift of your son. The joy that it is to sing the praises of him and of our salvation. And may you grace us in these next 45 to 50 minutes to continue to worship over your word. Penetrate us. Holy Father, Lord Jesus, draw near to your saints. Save those who have not yet come. Amen.

I find now this particular section that I just read here in the book of Acts somewhat frustrating, but also very encouraging. Frustrating because under the Lord's sovereign direction, Luke, for me, doesn't give enough details about a bunch of stuff. He just summarizes this large chunk of time. He just lets off this big shotgun of a bunch of stuff without giving some details about this stuff. Answers like, Why did Paul take a vow? What was the vow he took? Should he have taken a vow? And when Paul finally arrives in Ephesus and he's reasoning with the Jews there for a day or two, whatever. And they say, “Stay with us, tell us more,” he says no. And he leaves. Why? When he went to Jerusalem, which he did on this trip, how long was he there? What happened there? No. Nothing. And what exactly did Apollos know about the historical Jesus before Priscilla taught him more accurately? And why does Luke just fly through the last few months of Paul’s second missionary journey and the beginning of his third missionary journey with almost no detail?

Alright, but this passage is also encouraging because Luke gives us the picture that God has many servants. He doesn't mention anything about the original 12 apostles and what they're doing. But someone has preached the gospel in Rome, most likely where Aquila and Priscilla were converted to Jesus, someone has reached Alexandria, Egypt, where Apollos was converted to Jesus. Here's a woman in this text, Priscilla teaching a highly gifted and knowledgeable preacher of the gospel, being very helpful along with her husband, to his understanding. There is only one body, as we heard this morning, with many parts, and every part is significant. God doesn't call significant people. He calls people to himself to be in his Son, and he makes them significant in the way that pleases him, whether they get known or not. And that means every one of you who love the Lord Jesus.

Let's go to the text in verse 18 where we left off last time. “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.” So here's Paul. He left his home Church of Antioch on the second missionary journey about three years now. Before this, he's been gone for three years. Now he plans to finally return to the church in Antioch of Syria. They walked seven miles from Corinth to Cenchreae, which is a port town. Also there in Greece, where they intend to get on the ship and Luke says, “oh there’s where Paul cut off his hair because he was under a vow.” And that's all it says. Just a brief vow. What does that mean?

In general and specifically in the Old Testament, a vow means one is separating themselves for a particular purpose unto the Lord or consecrating themselves unto the Lord. Now, if you read Numbers 6, there in the law is laid out how to do what is called the Nazirite vow (has nothing do with the city of Nazareth, it's spelled differently). “Nazirite”, it means separated, holy for a purpose, and it lays it out. So, in that vow, whether you're going to do it for two weeks, it doesn't say; whether you’re gonna do it for three months, whether you're gonna do it for a year. A man or a woman could do it. Under that vow, once you started, you are not to cut your hair for the whole period of time. And you're also vowing not to touch grapes. Drink alcohol in any way during that time. And you're and you're also vowing to keep yourself ceremonially clean. In other words, if a loved one even dies, you don't go near the dead body. It would be unclean. You're under the vow. And then when the vow comes to its close, then what you do is you offer a sacrifice in the tabernacle or later in Jerusalem and you then cut off all your hair. Okay, there's the Nazirite vow.

Here Paul was under a vow and cuts off his hair at Cenchreae. We don't know if it was a Nazirite vow. Probably my guess is not. Maybe just a general vow. He’s setting himself apart for who knows how many months, maybe a vow of consecration in his ministry, there in Corinth or vow of constant thanksgiving, you know, as which is very New Testament, fasting reminding you, it's like you're devoting yourself to prayer while fasting and being hungry. Not eating is a helpful reminder. Being under a vow was a reminder, maybe of deep thanksgiving for what Jesus told him in the vision and verse 10. No one's gonna beat you up here in Corinth. He stayed there for a year and 1/2. No one. He's not gonna be jailed. Hurt. Maybe he's so thankful. You gotta remember now, Paul's a Jew. I mean, this is his culture. This is how he grew up. Okay, now, vows are never commended in the New Testament to Christian Jews or to Christian Gentiles. Doesn’t say anything about it, but here, Paul did it. It's right there in the text, and that's all Luke tells us, finishes his vow.

They jump on this ship. The ship is not a direct voyage to Palestine. It goes 200 miles across the Aegean Sea and it ports there at Ephesus, Paul gets off this ship. We don't know if it's just one day, two days or what, and he goes directly to the Jews in the synagogue to preach, open up the scripture, to reason with them, to show them that our scripture says that the Son of David, the Messiah suffered and died and rose from the dead. And that's exactly who Jesus of Nazareth is and what happened to him 20 years ago. He preaches. He just has a passion. As Paul put it himself, he says, “Woe is me. If I don't preach the gospel.” Essentially, he says that. “Don't praise me. I'm under obligation.” That's how he saw his life. So he’s got time. He goes to the synagogue. What is shocking is that these Jews, say, “don't leave, tell us more.” And what's more shocking, Paul says , “No.” Some way he's in a hurry. We don't know. It might have been the seasons. There's no engines on the ships. There's sailing time and times where it shuts down. You're not gonna be sailing across through the Mediterranean Sea, too dangerous. Maybe he wants to get to Jerusalem, and before a particular time, we don't really no. But he says, “if the Lord wills, I will come back here to you and this synagogue here in Ephesus.” Evidently, the Lord willed, because a year later he made it back, and that's Chapter 19 when we get there.

So he leaves Aquila and Priscilla, this married couple, close friends of his, believers who are Jews. The early separation of synagogue and the church doesn't happen all of a sudden. There’s synagogue goers here and there's probably some conversions. This married couple, they're very able to share the gospel. A small Jewish community and maybe with Gentile God-fearers to begin with is there in Ephesus. So they stay. Paul gets on the ship and he sails to Caesarea gets off the ship. He goes 50 miles to Jerusalem, to the church. We know nothing - how long he was there, what they talked about, what happened. Then he makes the hike 300 miles up north to Antioch in Syria. He stays there for a few months. His second missionary journey comes to a close.

And then Verse 23 begins his third missionary journey. Luke tells us, “After spending some time there in Antioch of Syria, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.” So here's Luke, he summarizes his 1300 mile journey from town to town, from church to church to church, and he does it all in one verse. What we do know, and what he does tell us, Paul goes back to all of these churches that he planted on his first and his second missionary journeys through the region of Galatia and Phrygia. Paul was not just driven to evangelism. He was deeply concerned about the growth, the spiritual growth of the converted, of the Christians, of the churches. And so he goes back to all of these churches, checking in on them, checking up on their elders and their teachers. And he's preaching to them and teaching them and exhorting them and encouraging them in the faith, strengthening the text says, “all the disciples.”

And that brings us now to Luke essentially saying (It's how I interpret it), “Take your eye off the Apostle Paul for a moment and look at the Lord use this other man in a powerful way,” even though he was clearly unfinished. Clearly not a complete product even as a preacher yet, like all of us, and yet the Lord used him like he uses us, who are being sanctified. Start with Verse 24. “Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus” (Paul's gone, Priscilla and Aquila are there, that budding little church is there). “He was an eloquent man,” literally very learned, good with his knowledge. You can feel it throughout the text. As a speaker, “he was competent in the Scriptures,” the Old Testament. “He had been instructed in the way of the Lord and being fervent in spirit.” He wasn't a boring teacher, evidently. He was fervent in spirit. “He spoke and he taught accurately the things concerning Jesus. Though he knew only the baptism of John, he began to speak boldly in the synagogue there in Ephesus. And Priscilla and Aquila are there in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they did not embarrass him. They took him aside, probably over to their home and explain to him the way of God more accurately.

So here's Apollos. He's a native born and raised in Alexandria, Egypt, which is one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire, and it has a huge Jewish population., unlike many other cities. He was a very well educated man. He studied rhetoric almost clearly, and he's very, very well educated in the Bible. In the Hebrew scriptures, Luke literally says he was “mighty in the Scriptures.” When he says he was instructed in the way of the Lord, which at minimum, it's gotta mean that much like Paul when it came to the Hebrew scriptures, he knew them backwards and forwards. He saw clearly through the scriptures that the Messiah, the Son of David, must suffer and die and rise from the dead. He sees that so clearly, as Paul would see it. He knows of baptism, evidently doesn't know of Christian baptism yet, like on the day of Pentecost. What Jesus commanded, for some reason, he doesn't know about it. He knows of John's baptism of repentance and prepare the way for the Messiah to come, for the Lord to come. He knows that Jesus, who came after John, is the Messiah. Somehow he's teaching some things accurately about Jesus. But, I mean, this is far as I can go in what Luke gives us. He has some holes, historical facts and holes about the Christ event and most likely, some theological holes that Aquila and Priscilla hear and say, “ah, we need to fill him in.”

So, what is he saying as a Jew to Jews? Is he getting it, as Jesus gave it directly to Paul, and Priscilla and Aquila clearly learned, that non-Jews and God-fearers who would come to Jesus do not need to become Jewish. Is he hearing what happens in the Christ event? Did he understand justification by faith alone, real clearly as Paul does, and clearly Priscilla and Aquila do? Are they filling him in on that? That's my guess, that kind of thing. His preaching as they hear it was not wrong. It just was incomplete. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and he taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. “No, Jesus told us to go out and make disciples of all nations, teaching him everything he taught and baptizing them in the name of the father, the son, and the spirit.” As Paul says, “Do you not know your baptism represented that you died with Christ?” They unpack more fully. You understand what's really happening in Jesus's death that we all died with him on the cross vicariously, as he did? Our sins were imputed to him, and we came out of the water alive with him because Jesus's life and righteousness is given to us. This is Christian baptism and a sign of the Holy Spirit working in Apollos, this very gifted, knowledgeable, smart dude was that his humility received it from a tent maker and his wife.

So they're in the new church there, which outside of the synagogue, most likely having meetings already in Aquila and Priscilla's house. Apollos is there for three months or six months or eight, we don't know, but he's there for a while and he's teaching and he's preaching. He's unfolding the scriptures, you know, arguing with the unbelieving Jews, and he is ministering to the believers. And then he felt like the Lord was calling him because he knows about the churches now over there in Greece, in Corinth, a little bit in Athens and in Cenchreae. He's feeling the Lord's calling him to go over there. I want to go there and preach. And so Aquila Priscilla, who have a very good reputation with the church in Corinth (they were there for a couple years in that church), they write a letter of recommendation for Apollos to go to take with him and say, “Receive him. He's trustworthy.” And all the believers that he had been ministering to in Ephesus there are fully behind this. In verse 27, “And when he [Apollos], wished to cross to Achaia (Greece), the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. And when Apollos arrived, he greatly helped those who, through grace had believed. For he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Messiah was Jesus.”

So he gets there and gets particularly to Corinth. It's been quite a while at this point now, since Paul was in Corinth, ministering and preaching and teaching, so Apollos would be a huge blessing to them. But he's got the letter of recommendation. This is a New Testament thing. For a moment, just listen to how Paul writes one of these. He's never been to the church up in the city of Rome, yet he wants to get there, hadn't been there. It's been planted by someone else. He writes what we call the book of Romans, and at the end of it, there are groups of people that carry these letters to towns. And one of the persons that he's sending up to Rome was a person who lived right outside of Corinth in Cenchreae, where she was converted. Her name is Phoebe. She's going up with it and Paul writes this to the church there. Chapter 16 verse 1 of Romans, “I commend.” There it is. Here's his letter of recommendation: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and help her in whatever she may need from you. For she has been, a patron (a supporter essentially), of many people and of myself, as well.”

So Apollos arrives in the city of Corinth, and he is very beneficial to them. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed (the believers), for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus, two things, crucial things that are right there. First, Apollos’ expertise in the Old Testament, put together with his giftings (God-given), or you can call them natural giftings of argument, training, his ability to reason, and what Luke is letting us know when talking about his fervent spirit, his passion, put together, he was publically refuting (that word really means overwhelming) these unbelieving Jews. And it was highly encouraging to the believers, because many of them are not nearly as skilled in the scripture, even the Jews, but much less the Gentiles who had been converted. They don’t nearly know the Old Testament as well as Apollos does, at least not yet. And so they're getting maybe confused by their adversaries now. “No, no, no, no. You're Jesus thing has nothing to do with the Old Testament Scripture.” I don't know, you know, like some Christians do when they hear a very, very skilled atheist. Sometimes they have no idea how to respond. Well, some Christians do. So go hear a good debate. You're encouraged. That guy really does have a lot of holes. That's what Apollos was doing. He wasn't making the gospel true, but he was so powerful in it and competent with the scriptures. He knew how to let the scriptures speak and thus shut the mouths of the adversaries of the Gospel. Luke tells us. He did it publicly.

But secondly, Apollos and his preaching ministry to the church was a great boost to those who, through grace, effectual grace, believe. And what this shows is that preaching the gospel to unbelievers in evangelism is important. But no less important is the ongoing preaching of the Gospel, and it's wonderful implications to the community of Christians. That's why Paul, in our passage, spends months going back to the converted, preaching to them, encouraging them, exhorting them, building them up in Christ, filling their understanding with knowledge. And now Apollos, he goes to the existing church in Corinth and he does the same thing. And those Christians, according to the text, were greatly helped by that. See whether we’re 12 years old or 18 or 45 years old, when we first come to faith in Jesus, we’re babies. We’re all baby Christians when we first become a Christian who are meant to grow to mature spiritually in the way that we live and in what we know. And the main way that that happens is through and in the word of God, the scriptures being preached and unfolded in Christ’s community and walking it out in that community. Here's the way the Holy Spirit puts that through Paul in Ephesians 4: And Jesus, after he ascended on high, “he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, the teachers in order to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine or teaching that comes along by human cunning by craftiness and deceitful schemes. No, but rather by all the Christians in the community speaking the truth in love. That's how we're to grow up in every way into him who is the head, that is, to Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped. When each person or part is working properly, it makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

So Apollos, he's in Corinth. He's playing his part. He wasn't perfect. We see that in the text he's always got room for growth. Like all of us, he was in process, but he was a gift and he was called. He went there. And we know, right? If you’ve been a Christian long enough, you read your Bible. The Corinthians were in process. I mean, a better way to say it is they weren't growing nearly as quickly as they should have. They were filled with sinful tendencies and immaturity, bad habits and some of that immaturity of the believers in the church at Corinth showed up in the way it began to bicker with one another about who was the greater preacher. “I mean, I know I remember when Paul was here, but Apollos, he's dynamic, fervent in spirit. Paul's a little boring. It was nice when Peter came through, but *Apollos*, that's who I follow.” It's a very familiar problem in today's church world, particularly with the Internet. So that's what's going on. You know the way Paul wrote his first letter two years after this. He says this to them, “For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas,’ or ‘I follow Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Course not. And then Paul's on the same subject for chapters, about the word of God, about the gospel of God in its work in the soul, in saving and in sanctifying. And so he brings it back in chapter three, and he says this, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.” Yes, I Paul came there to preach the gospel. The church was founded. I planted and then, as we see in our text, and Paul says Apollos watered. But God gave the growth. So neither Paul who plants, nor Apollos who waters, is anything but a slave. But the one who is everything, only God who gives the growth.

God uses people like Apollos who only knew the baptism of John. But not forever. He grew, he learned. Just so you know that Paul and Apollos absolutely met. And Paul loved Apollos. Paul was greatly affirming and encouraging about Apollos’ ministry of the word. One to two years after what we see of Apollos in our text here and then going to Corinth, Apollos and Paul were together in the city of Ephesus. And this is how Paul is closing his letter to the Corinthian church. He says this in 1 Cor. 16:12: “Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers.” Apollos, go back to Corinth. Go preach there. Go hang out with them. They need you. “I strongly encouraged him to visit you with the other brothers,” (who had just come with this letter) “but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.”

So a major core of the Christian life, is community. It is eating meals together in community for our spiritual nourishment, meals that are served up by Paul, Peter, Apollos, or elders, teachers. And in our day and age, Bibles are cheap. There’s snacks and self-fed meals served up in our quiet times of slow and prayerful, heart-searching Bible eating. The scripture is the food of the soul for every true believer. And our key in the eating is to follow Apollos’ humility. Humility to constantly yearn to be corrected when we’re wrong. To learn something you don't know that you don't know until you see it and you receive it and fill that hole. That vacuum of your understanding, of your thinking, of your living, of your walking. Humility appreciates the Priscilla's and the Aquilas in our lives. And when the meal is served up in the preaching of Apollos, or of Timothy, or of Clement of Rome, or of John Chrysostom, or St. Augustine, or Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, or Charles Haddon Spurgeon, or thousands upon thousands of teaching pastors today, when the meal is served up, we are to come to the table, as the Corinthians did when Apollos arrived. And the result was they were greatly helped, those who through grace, believed. They heard and were greatly helped, nourished. And so, in preparing for mealtime on Sunday mornings, a word to the wise: you should not wait until you get here in order to prepare your heart. This is the thing about the difference between eating spiritual food and physical. The more you nibble at spiritual food before you get here, and open your Bible, pray, purposely don’t have discussions with your spouse, try not to argue with the kids, you pray, the more you nibble and eat, it doesn't mean, “Okay now I'm not hungry.” It makes you more hungry because we should come to the table begging God beforehand for the first couple hours before, “Soften my heart.” So that as soon as the psalm is read, the prayer is prayed, the first string on the guitar strung, the words show up that I'm gonna sing. I am filled with joy. And that goes to a very practical thing: learn to go to bed early enough on Saturday night so that you are alert and filled with hope and joy on Sunday morning. I've been a Christian for 38 years, and for more than half of that, I was not a pastor. I know what it is to be a non-preaching pastor Christian, and I know what it is to come prepared. Oh, and how the Lord blesses. And I know what it is to do Saturday nights in such a way that I ruin the most important morning of the whole week. So let me commend to you the words of John Piper. “If there's a special late night, make it Friday. It's a terrible thing to teach children that worship is so optional that it doesn't matter if you are exhausted when you come.”

So let's be like Apollos. Apollos lived James 1:21, “receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” Received with meekness, what does that mean? At the core it means teachability. “Get me Lord, the implanted word,” which is able to save your souls. So you have Bibles. You have brains come to eat on Sunday mornings, *earnestly* while you're really awake, thinking about what is sung, and what is prayed, and what is read, and what is preached. And you do it with the goal of wanting the Holy Spirit to drive it all deep into your soul, your heart, your affections, your decisions, your life, your marriage, your singleness, your evangelism, your work and 10,000 other things. And our Lord is faithful to do it.

Let's pray. Lord, we know you are faithful. For what we're saying is we want to eat throughout the week, Sunday mornings, with our kids, alone, with a spouse. We want to eat the Bible. We want to love the Bible. We want to understand more and more of it. We want to pray it. We want you to tangibly affect us. And it is for this that you came and suffered and died and rose and ascended and sent the Holy Spirit. And so we know you're always faithful to the Gospel. But we're weak. We are undone. We're all in process, which was also your will. And so as needy children, as babies who want food, we say in all of this change us day by day from glory to glory. Make us desperate and hungry for you to the glory of your name. Amen.