

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 7: Acts 18, 19, 20

*“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood,
but against principalities,
against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world,
against spiritual wickedness in high places.
Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be
able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand...”*
Ephesians 6:12-13

ACTS 18: A CHANGE OF PAUL'S PLANS--THE REVELATION OF GOD'S PLAN

We have seen how Paul's mission to Macedonia changed through circumstances to move him into the south of Greece—the region known as Achaia. Missionary work as we are used to it in our day, organized and coordinated, is very different from Paul's experience. Because it was impossible to communicate regularly with other church leaders, Paul was thrown upon his own resources and those of the Master he served. In every age God is able to adapt His work to existing conditions, for the Holy Ghost provides the ultimate communication system---always up and running twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Paul always felt “in touch” with Jesus Christ, who led His own redemptive work, always providing both the power and the direction needed in every situation.

Yet even with so finely tuned a “receiver” as Paul was, the Lord through His Holy Spirit does not always tell His faithful servants the end from the beginning. In fact, He rarely ever does that. His servants go forward in the firm faith that Jesus Christ, who heads His church, has a definite plan for the unfolding of His work on the earth. We don't need to know all the details of that plan, only believe that it exists and that the work He has given us to do that day, or that month, is a part of the plan. One of the signposts that tell us we are on the right path, is finding God's provision along the way. When we watch God's plan unfold in our own lives, it reveals in its details that God has long been at work arranging things ahead of time so that we could magnify our calling and live out His will.

It is as if the servant were following a trail in the forest he believed was the one his Master had told him to follow in order to reach a promised destination, but occasionally the path was through extremely difficult territory. He kept going though brambles cut his flesh and there were close scrapes with lurking enemies and cold and hard ground to sleep on. Then, every once in a while, he had the glorious experience of coming on a little cabin in the woods to which he finds he has a key. Inside he finds food and fresh clothing and a comfortable place to sleep. These things refresh him physically but even more, they are a spiritual and emotional refreshment—for they mean the Master is aware of His servant's needs and has carefully provided ahead of time, all that is needed for task assigned. More than anything, God's provision is a confirmation that we are in His will and on the right path and that we do not need to fear failure because of our own personal limitations. God always provides whatever is needed when we are doing His work in His way.

At other points in the journey, as the servant follows the path, it seems to be leading somewhere---up a mountain or through a valley. But suddenly the path ends, taking the servant by surprise. He was so sure the path was leading up that mountain! But it must not, for here it clearly ends, against a granite wall. The faithful servant does not lose faith, or think his Master has forgotten him. Rather he looks around for the sign he knows must surely be somewhere close by that will guide him to the new path he is to take.

TRUE FRIENDS AND FELLOW SERVANTS

So Paul, the faithful servant, ends up in the large, bustling navy town of Corinth. It was not the place where he thought the path was going to take him. But here he was forced by circumstances to be, so it must be God's will that he be here. The city was a Roman outpost and a center for trade. It was also a port town, a "sin city" of well-known reputation that catered to the lowest desires of the soldiers and sailors who found themselves there. At this point Paul was alone. Silas and Timotheus were coming, but Paul had no idea when they would arrive. Just then, when the path seemed to have ended in front of a granite wall, God sent Aquila and Priscilla into Paul's life. It is in our helplessness that God can best demonstrate His strength!

This couple seems almost too good to be true. They are Christians in a city that wasn't supposed to have any Christians. In fact they were Jews who had been converted in Rome. And they were tentmakers who had an established business. This was the trade Paul was experienced in from his youth and so, suddenly, a door was opened and Paul had a way to earn a living in this strange city, and to earn it in the company of this couple who were just as committed to Jesus Christ as Paul was. Their labor together must have been a bond of love, and a sweet antidote to the bitterness of rejection and persecution Paul received from his Jewish brothers. The happy coincidence of the three of them finding themselves together in Corinth was clearly no coincidence at all, but the final piece of a puzzle that had been coming together for some time.

We do not know who first took the message of Christianity to Rome. But we do know that in 49 AD Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome for one year because of riots and disturbances "at the instigation of Chrestus." [Christos? i.e., Christ?] This note was made by the historian Suetonius 50 years later in his history of the reign of Claudius. Very likely this refers to disagreements within the Jewish community over the preaching of Jesus as the Christ. It would certainly not have been the first time this kind of trouble had erupted when the gospel message was taken to the Jews.

When the emperor Claudius solved his civil disturbance problem by kicking all Jews---the Christian and non-Christian variety alike---out of Rome, it must have seemed at the time like a terrible defeat for Christianity. Who was left to evangelize the city? But our perspective is necessarily limited. God can see much farther than we can. He knows what He is planning to do. He was patiently setting up the pieces on the board for the next move He was going to make in Corinth. He needed to provide for Paul so he could bring the gospel to that city and so he moved Priscilla and Acquilla there for the very period of time that Paul needed them.

HEAVENLY MESSAGE

Silas and Timotheus finally arrive in Corinth and Paul begins his missionary outreach in earnest, boldly preaching "to the Jews that Jesus was Christ." But as in every other place where he preached, the Jews oppose him vehemently. Luke records it as "they opposed themselves." How true this is, reminding us of those times when we were misbehaving as children and our parents would tell us, "You're only hurting yourself!" In exasperation, Paul shakes his clothing before them, a symbolic gesture that means he is free of responsibility for them. "Your blood be upon your own heads! From henceforth, I go to the Gentiles!" This was always the message that proved the tipping point for their fury, and Paul must have thought, "Here we go again." As before there had been a few who did respond favorably to Paul's message, and one of these, Justus, provided a meeting place in his house for the Corinthians who wanted to gather and hear Paul's message.

It is at this point that the Lord reassures Paul through a vision that Corinth will be different. This is such a gracious loving gesture of the Lord toward the beleaguered apostle. He tells Paul His plans for a successful mission in Corinth, that He has "much people in this city" and that "no man shall set on thee to hurt thee." This is not a promise of no trouble, but that whatever attacks Paul suffers will not harm him. The thing Paul longed for was to be able to bring souls to Jesus Christ, and to be promised that his efforts would bear fruit was a tremendous blessing of emotional and spiritual strength.

GALLIO

We come now to a second manifestation of God's pre-planning. At sometime in the 18 months that Paul worked in Corinth, a new "deputy", or chief Roman official, took office. His name was Gallio and we know quite a bit about him from outside sources. His family was very influential in Rome--his brother was Seneca, the famous Stoic philosopher and dramatist. By all accounts a very learned and charming man, the Corinthian Jews sought a hearing before him on the matter of Paul's preaching, apparently hoping that this new official would see things their way. In this they were disappointed.

Perhaps a lesser man could have been convinced that the Christians were a threat to Rome's power, but Gallio, with his wider views, was not taken in by the attempt to paint Paul as a political threat. With a stern lecture that they had no business bothering him about the Jews internal affairs, he "drove them from the judgment seat." This "judgment seat" was a raised platform in the outdoor market, and the gathered crowd, taking a clue from this unfavorable ruling, gave vent to their anti-Semitic feelings, and beat up the ruler of the synagogue, a man named Sosthenes. Thus ends any overt Jewish opposition and Paul and his companions are free to actively continue proselyting in the city.

LEAVING CORINTH

Paul's labors in Corinth are not told in detail in Luke's account but we know from his letters, from historical accounts, from the Lord's prophecy of success and simply from the long time he stayed there, that Paul must have reaped a great harvest in Corinth. It is likely that in the first weeks and months, when this outcome was by no means sure, Paul had done a typical Jewish thing—he had made a Nazarite vow as a means of imploring God's favor on his work. This entailed giving up wine and not cutting his hair for the period of the vow.* At the end of the vow, the person making the Nazarite vow must go to Jerusalem, cut his hair, and offer his cut hair along with certain sacrifices in the temple. Paul therefore feels himself under a heavy spiritual obligation to finish his vow in the proper way, since God has answered his petition with such an outpouring of success.

He leaves Corinth, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him, and comes to Ephesus. This is a city he has much wanted to visit, but he cannot take the time to begin a work there now. However he promises he will return. His friends stay there while he continues to Jerusalem. Acts 18:22 is a shorthand verse. By the term "go up" we are meant to understand that Paul did indeed make the climb to Jerusalem's hills and Jerusalem's temple, where he finished his vow. With that accomplished, he headed back to his home church of Antioch. This city was as close to a home as Paul had. Luke tells us that "he spent some time there" but the purpose that constantly drove him was winning new converts to the Lord and his gospel of grace. So Paul begins a third missionary journey by heading first into the interior of Asia Minor, to his old missionary area of Galatia and Phrygia to strengthen the disciples in the cities there.

APOLLOS

We are introduced at the end of chapter 18 to the fascinating character of Apollos. We are told he was eloquent, learned in the scriptures and that he came from Alexandria. Alexandria was one of the great centers of learning in the Roman world. Where Apollos became acquainted with Christianity we are not told, but he was boldly preaching "the things of the Lord" in Ephesus, knowing "only the baptism of John." This raises more questions than it answers: Did he hear Jesus speak? Did John or one of his disciples baptize him? Did he hear John bear witness of Jesus? We wish we knew more. However we know that he magnified fully the light and knowledge that he had, sharing his testimony with the Jews in Ephesus. Perhaps he was the Hugh Nibley of his day, being both learned and able to teach others. When Aquila and Priscilla arrive, they fill in the "blank spots" in his understanding of the gospel. All this he accepts readily, and so because of his desire and his effectiveness at convincing others of the message, he is sent back to the church at Corinth, to continue the work there.

The message of Apollos to us today is simply to enthusiastically lay our talents on the altar of God. He was not perfect in his knowledge but he did not let that paralyze him. He was a man who took

action. God had given him the gift of convincing speech, and he offered that gift with wholehearted zeal. One is reminded of Amulek in the Book of Mormon, whose enthusiasm for the gospel made him an effective missionary though a “greenie.”

PAUL'S MISSIONARY LABORS IN EPHEBUS: ACTS 19

After Paul's circuit through Asia Minor, Paul finally arrives back in Ephesus, a city that he had desired to open missionary work in. It was a natural center for such work because of its strategic location. Roman roads led from it into the rich interior regions of Asia Minor and a constant stream of trade and pilgrims to its famous shrine to Artemis made it a logical choice. Upon arriving Paul first makes a survey of who may already be a Christian in the city. Of course, his friends Aquila and Priscilla are there and would have opened their home to him. He also finds twelve men who identify themselves as believers, but Paul notes that some important steps have been missed. They don't even know what the Holy Ghost is, having been baptized with John's baptism, like Apollos. A Christian without the Holy Ghost is like a car with no gas in its tank. The twelve men had been sleeping in their cars. When they were rebaptized by Paul and received the Holy Ghost through the laying on of his hands, they discovered what a car was really for and they took off—speaking in tongues and prophesying! These verses are great to have in our missionary arsenals as the Christian world today more and more claims that baptism and the reception of the Holy Ghost by an ordinance is not necessary or even important.

Paul goes first to the Jews, speaking with them in their synagogue, as he always did. Perhaps because Apollos had made some headway before him, Paul was welcome in the synagogue for three months, longer than usual before being rejected by the Jews. But the split finally does come, and Paul moves to the school of Tyrannus (Greek for Tyrant). This was probably a nickname for the school director or even the landlord of the space Paul used, for it seems unlikely that anyone's parents had actually named their child Tyrant. But in this building Paul sets up shop, preaching the message of God's grace to all who will hear it for two years. Luke notes that “all they who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus;” so the message was spreading as waves spread from a rock tossed into a pond. As was the case with the preaching of Jesus Christ himself, Paul's work was characterized by remarkable miracles of healing that brought publicity to the Christian movement.

A CLASH OF TWO POWERS

Paul's successful healings also invited imitation. Ephesus was particularly known as a center of magic arts. Typical of magic is the reliance on special magical words and names of power that, if known and used properly, were thought to bring impressive results. However the power in the name of Jesus is not that of a “magic word.” A man named Sceva and his seven sons advertised their ability to exorcise evil spirits. They had seen and heard of the miracles Paul did. When they tried to use the same language that Paul did to exorcise an evil spirit, they found out how powerless they really were. Sceva and his sons were attacked by the man who had the evil spirit, pulling down their folly upon their own heads and enlightening everyone in the region to the differences between priesthood power and magic arts. As a result many were converted. As part of “bringing forth works meet for repentance” they brought their books of magic to be burned in a public show repudiating their former works.

This image of the burning books of magic highlights a theme that Luke has touched on before. Remember Peter's confrontation with Simon Magus, and Paul's with the possessed girl in Philippi. Luke does not relate these incidents to show that there is no such thing as an evil spirit or a magician in league with dark powers, but rather to show that God is infinitely more powerful. Paul reminded the Ephesians in the letter he later wrote to them: “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.” (Ephesians 6:10)

Perhaps because Ephesus was such a center of magic arts and idol worship, Paul was particularly aware of the difference between these false powers and the true power that was to be found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is a marked theme in his letter to the Ephesians. For example: “The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the

riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, 19 And what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, 20 Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, 21 Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come, 22 And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, 23 Which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.” (Ephesians 1:18-23) Paul gloried in the fact that he had a mighty Savior, who had all power given to Him.

Paul could say, like Micah of the Old Testament, “Truly I am full of power by the spirit of the LORD.” (Micah 3:8) Paul was the humblest of men, because he knew with absolute certainty that the power that converted men and women to Christ and healed them, and the power that planned and guided the details of his missionary work, and the power that met each attack of Satan's opposition, was not his own human strength at all, but the power of God's spirit working through him.

“GREAT IS DIANA OF THE EPHESIANS!”

After some time had passed, Paul's heart begins to turn to the churches of Greece and he wants to know how the saints are doing there. He sends Timothy and Erastus to go on ahead of him. The text leads us to believe that Paul was receiving intimations from the Spirit of the road that lay ahead of him—that after a return trip to Greece, then to Jerusalem, “I must see Rome.” (Acts 19:21) But before he leaves Ephesus, Luke, who has been summing up years at a time in a single sentence, is about to record one last event in the city, and to do it in a record 19 verses. As we look at the text, it makes sense to ask why he would give this particular incident in such detail.

The background is this: Ephesus was home to a magnificent temple to the goddess Diana that had been built in the fourth century B.C. It was almost four times as big as the Parthenon in Athens and was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. A great multi-breasted statue of the Asian version of Artemis, or Diana, was ensconced in the temple. Pilgrims came from all over the Greco-Roman world to worship there and the pilgrim trade was a major prop of the economy of the region. It was also a sophisticated center of Greek culture with a famous library, beautiful classical buildings and a large amphitheatre.

A man named Demetrius whips a mob into a frenzy to fight against the success of the Christian mission, convincing his hearers that their city and livelihood is in danger. This incident is very reminiscent of the mob troubles that the Saints in our dispensation faced in Missouri and Nauvoo. The ending of the stories is different however. And Luke's purpose in telling this story in such particular detail is to show that the civil magistrates in this case side with the Christians and publicly criticize the mob for their unlawful behavior. Luke's record was intended to discourage this route of attack on Christianity from other locations in the Roman world.

This defense of the legitimacy of Christianity is unneeded today. The Roman Empire, then so powerful, is reduced to stone ruins. However there is much in the account that does still speak to us. There is a powerful theme that runs throughout the book of Acts of **spiritual warfare**. Paul knew exactly where all the opposition he faced was coming from. He wrote to the Ephesians “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” (Ephesians 6:12) For Paul, it didn't really matter whether the opposition came from Ephesian silversmiths, from hardened Jewish hostility, or from disinterested Athenian cynics. These were all fronts in the same war against Satan himself. Paul knew whose side he was on and what it took to be a “good soldier.”

Paul writes in his letter to Timothy, “I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course...” (2 Timothy 4:7) And again, “Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that [fights in a war] entangles himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.” (2nd Timothy 2:3-4) “Good soldier” is surely an apt description of Paul himself for no one could have battled more tirelessly against the powers of darkness to establish beach-

heads of truth in the Greco-Roman world of the first century. Those of us who come 2000 years after the first wave of Christian soldiers, might be in danger of being “lulled into carnal security” but not our hero Paul. He gave his life—lock, stock, and barrel—into the cause of Christ.

A FINAL CIRCUIT

The riot at Ephesus provides an opportune time for him to depart, for there always seem to be those whose opposition to Paul would take the form of murder if it could. In this his life fulfills a prophecy the Savior made: “Remember the word that I said unto you, the servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” (John 15:20)

Paul travels once more to Macedonia, then down to Greece. His constant desire to revisit the cities where he planted churches shows how much these saints remained on his heart and in his prayers. It is clear from his letters to them that he loved these converts as if they were his own children.

He planned to sail back to Asia from Corinth but a plot on his life called for a sudden change of plans (once again!) and he retraced his steps on land back to Macedonia and over to Troas. It was during a week's stay in Troas saying goodbye to the saints that the incident with the young man, Eutychus, occurs. The setting suggests the great love the people had for Paul, for they stay up all night to hear every word he has for them knowing they would probably not see him again. Eutychus falls asleep during Paul's sermon (he was a teenager after all!) and survives a three-story fall, an outcome that is attributed to the healing powers of Paul. The gathered saints “were not a little comforted” by this.

Because a trip inland to Ephesus would take so long and because it would be difficult to make it a quick stop, Paul decides to land in the coastal city of Miletus, which is about 28 miles as the crow flies from Ephesus. He sends for the elders of the church and delivers a particularly heart felt goodbye that sums up his own feelings about his life and ministry. Because he talks about being “bound in the spirit” and the “Holy Ghost witness[ing] in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions [await] me,” one has the feeling that he would not choose this course of action himself, but that it was chosen for him.

NEITHER COUNT I MY LIFE DEAR UNTO MYSELF

Many tears accompanied Paul's farewell, for the love flowed both ways. He bore his testimony that the one thing he cared about was finishing strong, “with joy”, the task given him personally by Jesus Christ to testify “of the gospel of the grace of God.” If you translate the word gospel into its original Greek sense of “good news” then we see that Paul's ultimate purpose was to tell people the good news of the grace of God. If we really want to understand Paul we will have to understand what a huge sea change was represented in turning from a view of religion as a set of rigid rules to religion that is at its heart was a relationship with God himself. (see D&C 39:23) To the Jews religion was seen as a code that one must constantly live up to. Paul's view was of a religion based on God's love. This God accepts repentant sinners who come to Him broken hearted because of their weaknesses, asking for mercy, forgiveness and to be filled with the “riches” of His freely given grace (i.e., gifts). In the first way, God owes the law keeper a reward, for he has “earned” it. In the second way, the sinner owes the Lord everything, for the Lord, who is the only one who ever “earned” exaltation, is willing to share that inheritance with His covenant sons and daughters. (See Mosiah 5:7,13; D&C 78:22) That, of course, is how Paul felt every minute of every day since the road to Damascus, and why he says that nothing can persuade him to change his course, even if it means he must die for Christ.

* I am reminded of a college roommate who vowed to give up all sugar and dessert during the time that her boyfriend was serving in Viet Nam if God would just keep him safe. It worked, or at least, the boyfriend came home without injury.