

Bible Study Notes for 4-2-24

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Acts 18:23-20:38

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Paul's Third Missionary Journey

There is a great deal of emphasis today on the need to be well-informed. As a matter of fact, millions of people are involved in some form of what we call continuing education. It is not uncommon for people in mid-life to return to school to further their education. Training seminars are increasingly popular. And thousands, if not millions, are enrolled in courses offered on-line by reputable institutions of learning.

Behind all of this it is recognized that we cannot stand still. Either we grow or we fall victims to idleness and slip into decline. The Apostle Paul was undoubtedly aware that growth was necessary in the spiritual life of new believers in the churches he had organized and nurtured.

Our last lesson closed with Paul's return to Syrian Antioch after his second missionary journey. Now Luke writes, "***And after he had spent some time there, he departed, and went over all the country of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples***" (18:23). Once again Paul is on the move as he heads out from Antioch, on the way to his home city of Tarsus. From there he makes his way over the Tarsus mountains. It is believed he visited with and instructed groups of believers wherever he could find them.

Luke does not give us any detail on these visits except to indicate that Paul kept moving into Phrygia where he continued his nurturing and teaching ministry. Paul knew that a failure to follow up would result in a loss of power and liveliness among these Asia Minor believers and churches. During this time he was not only preaching salvation, but was actively engaged in his own style of "continuing education."

Completing the Picture (18:23-19:10)

Luke breaks away from his narrative now and introduces a new character. By doing so he draws attention to the gaps that existed in the lives of some believers despite the apostle's progress. This next part of our lesson gives us two examples of how Paul labored to bring new believers into a more complete understanding and experience of the faith.

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Introducing Apollos

The first example centers on the person of Apollos. In just a few words Luke gives us a picture of this Jew from Alexandria, a city founded by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. Alexandria was a great university center that offered rich resources of learning.

In his brief biographical sketch Luke tells us that Apollos was eloquent, was highly trained in the Scriptures, was religiously learned, was strong in spirit, and was a good teacher (18:24-25). We meet Apollos in the ancient city of Ephesus where he was teaching and preaching in the synagogue, but Luke gives us a clue that something was missing when he says that Apollos knew ***“only the baptism of John” (18:25).***

This tells us that Apollos was a disciple of John the Baptist, and as such he carefully followed the strict rules for life and conduct that were observed by the members of the Baptist’s sect. Apollos understood baptism for repentance, and he knew about Jesus. And what he knew, Apollos represented well and with eloquent enthusiasm, but when Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they saw that something was missing. And they knew what it was.

Like John the Baptist, Apollos called people to leave behind their former ways of thinking and living. They were to repent—turn around and head in a new direction, but the message stopped there. It told them what they should leave behind; it did not tell them what they should embrace.

Aquila and Priscilla saw that while Apollos understood about baptism for repentance, he did not know about, and he had not experienced, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And while he was being used by the Lord to lead people to repentance, his ministry was incomplete and lacked power. And so Luke tells us that the very wise and spiritually mature Aquila and Priscilla took him aside ***“and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” (18:26).***

Now we see something in this man that not only was he a good teacher, but that he was also teachable. There is no hint in Luke’s brief mention that he resisted the instruction of Aquila and Priscilla. With all his talent it would have been easy for him to feel offended. With the success he had experienced so far, it would have been understandable for him to protest, “What do I need to be instructed about?” But instead, he submitted to the guidance of these new spiritual mentors of his and entered a whole new experience of faith. And while Luke does not describe what happened, he writes about the results as Apollos left Ephesus and ministered throughout southern Greece: ***...the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who***

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when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace: for he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publickly, showing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ: (18:27-28).

Now, Apollos had the power to help the new Christians, and he had come, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to a new belief that Jesus was indeed the Christ—the Messiah. From the brief biographical sketch Luke gave us of Apollos, we noted that he was well educated, had a good knowledge of the Scriptures, and was a gifted leader and communicator. But that was not enough for him, and it is not for us. We may know a lot about Jesus but not really know Him in the power of the Holy Spirit. The power to live a rich, fulfilled, and productive Christian life comes only through the presence of the indwelling Jesus Who has become Lord as well as Savior.

Paul Begins His Ministry in Ephesus

Now we pick up again on the Apostle Paul. Luke brings us together now as Paul arrives in Ephesus. In Paul's day Ephesus was already at least 1,000 years old. It was a magnificent city and in Roman times was the capital of the province of Asia. The city was a center for idol worship with its prostitute-priestesses and pagan practices.

It was to this thriving city that Paul now came. And it was here that he spent three years of his life. Luke tells us that upon Paul's arrival in Ephesus he contacts certain of the Ephesians Christians, and this brings us to the second illustration. To Paul something was missing in their lives, and so he asked, ***“Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?” (19:2).*** They responded that they did not know anything about the Holy Ghost—all they were aware of was the baptism of John the Baptist.

They had obeyed and believed as far as they knew to go. But as Paul explained, that was not enough, so now he opened to them the Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were anxious to complete their faith and they believed and were baptized again ***“in the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:5).*** And it was then that the Holy Spirit came upon them with great power (19:6).

From the insights given us here in this part of our lesson we see the importance of being complete in our faith and of helping others to know that same experience. We have learned that in Christ we are saved from something—sin, and we are also saved for something—righteousness. We are moving from being saved by faith to living by faith. Our viewpoint is shifting from looking backward to the beginning point to looking forward to the full challenges of being a believer indwelt by the living Lord. And it is then that we move from membership to discipleship—a quality of life and

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a depth of commitment that comes from experiencing wholeness through Christ in the Christian way of life.

Now these twelve men had moved from a process (the baptism of John) to a Person (the Holy Spirit). They had moved from ritual to power and beyond an experience to the ongoing vitality of the experience. And this was made possible for them, and for us, by a continuing relationship with Christ, and that is made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Following his experience with the twelve men who had been followers of John the Baptist, Paul turned his attention to a teaching and preaching schedule in the synagogue in Ephesus. Few details are given us about this period except Luke writes that after three months a dispute arose among the Jews over his teaching and Paul had to end his synagogue ministry. But he then moved his headquarters to the school of Tyrannus, well known philosopher.

Paul's Ministry in Ephesus

Ephesus was a center of superstition and witchcraft. And with all the mighty works Paul did there in the name of Jesus, it was only natural that these works would attract the attention of some of the corrupt rascals who were involved in magic-for-profit schemes (19:13-14). Sceva and his sons—all renegade Jews—had seen some of Paul's miracles, and they attempted to duplicate them by invoking Jesus' name even though they did not believe in Him.

The results of this trickery were unsuccessful even though there is a hint of humor in what happened. When the rascals commanded an evil spirit to come out of a person, ***“the evil spirits answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” (19:15)***. And with that the possessed man attacked Sceva and his sons, they were hurt and had to run for their lives (19:16).

The exposure of these imitators, which showed the difference between sorcery and magic and the miracles performed in Jesus' name, impressed everyone in the city. And Luke tells us that many of them became believers and burned their books of magic and their charms.

From our point of view, what does this strange story have to say to us today? It has a practical application because in a way the problem behind this incident is still with us. Unfortunately, we do not have to look too far before we see someone attempting to exercise the power of the gospel without having had the experience. And there are those who use the language without having participated in the realities of the Chris-

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tian life. And there are those who profess a faith in God but who never act it out in daily living.

Then, too, there are people who have seen the disastrous results of trying to call on a power they do not possess. And like their Ephesus predecessors (19:19), they are now trading in their superstition and magic for the real thing—they are exchanging churchianity” for real Christianity. And now, as then, when this exchange takes place, the Word of God grows greatly and prevails (19:20), both in individual lives and in the total witness of the church.

As we turn back to the Scripture lesson now, Luke seems to insert a two verse parenthesis (19:21-22) in his description of these Ephesian events. Although Paul has a passionate concern for the people in Ephesus, his mind wanders to Greece and Jerusalem—and even to Rome. For the longest, he has wanted to personally visit the Imperial City. For years he has traveled the Roman roads in Asia Minor and Greece—now he wanted to see the end of those roads and preach the gospel there! But it is not the Lord’s time for Paul to leave, so, he sends two representatives to Greece, but he remains in Ephesus.

We now come to the second confrontation of this part of our lesson (19:24-41). The wrong use of the name of Jesus was not the problem confronting the church in Ephesus. There were imitators of the faith through the production of “spirits” (idols) designed by Ephesian craftsmen. But as a result of Paul’s preaching, the demand for the shrines of Diana was weakening and so was the profit for those who made and sold them. And all of this created a crisis between the imitators/false deities of Ephesian culture and their makers, and the Christians who were faithful to their Lord.

Luke now introduces a new character, Demetrius, who was not only a spokesman for the “Silversmith Association” but was a spellbinder of a spokesman (19:25-27). He knew that if Christianity flourished, he and his fellow craftsmen would be broke. He had heard the word that wherever Paul went he insisted that there are “no gods, which are made with hands.” This was a crisis that had to be met, so Demetrius whipped up the crowd until a full-fledged riot was in the making.

After all, to have their profit-making business disrupted was a serious matter that had to be handled quickly. But there was another issue here that was equally touchy. With clever rhetoric Demetrius pointed out that if the Christians got the upper hand, their image as a city would be downgraded in all of Asia (19:27). There was an “Ephesian Way” that had to be preserved. Jesus challenged that way by undercutting the very foundations of pagan religion in Ephesus and all of Asia.

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Luke gives us a graphic description of the scene caused by Demetrius' rhetoric. The crowd became angry and began to chant, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." This fired up the crowd, and they snatched Paul's two Greek companions and rushed to the great theater (19:29). It is unlikely that it was jammed to its capacity. Luke indicates that Paul was not in the crowd at the time all of this was going on, but undoubtedly when he heard what was happening, he wanted to go and speak to them. But both his fellow Christians and "certain of the chief of Asia"—the Asiarchs, which were the elected officials for the province—persuaded Paul not to make an appearance (19:30-31).

The crowd that filled the theater was confused as to what to do next. As a matter of fact, Luke tells us that many of them did not even know why they were there—they had just seen a crowd and heard the noise and followed. Finally, they picked up again on the chant, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." And as we have already seen, this was something Rome would not put up with, so he pleaded with the crowd to calm down and not resort to violence but let the normal process of Roman law take its course—Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen could file charges and the tribunal would make its ruling (19:35-41). The voice of authority broke through their confused state, and the crowd broke up.

On the surface the meaning for us from this whole event might seem a bit vague, but there are certain important lessons here for us—there is much about the "Ephesian Pattern" that exists in our world today. There is a tendency to keep Jesus in the background if He and His teachings interfere with our comfort and with our earnings. It has been said that the hardest thing to convert is our pocketbook. If a threat to our materialistic god comes on the scene, we tend to revolt and rationalize our way out.

And like the Ephesians, we do not want our image and our way disturbed. We build cultural and denominational fences so high that not only do we shut others out, but we cannot see ourselves. But this was not the vision Jesus passed along to His disciples, and it was not Paul's vision. The Christian vision is to the whole world. It does not shut people out, and it does not exploit them. At the same time we must stand firmly, as did the Ephesian Christians, against the fake "spirits," the idols, the alternative gods, that threaten our Christian walk. And above all, we twenty-first century Christians must carefully guard against attempting to reshape Jesus to fit our situation.

Paul's long stay at Ephesus had now wound down to a close. It had been a time of victory but also a time of stress. In just a few words now, Luke gives us a glimpse of a delicate scene (20:1). Before leaving Ephesus and closing out his three-year

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ministry, ***“Paul called unto him the disciples, and embraced them.”*** These Christian friends had come to mean a great deal to him and they had been through a lot together as they took their stand against the idol gods in Ephesus. The love and support of Christian friends is one of our richest treasures.

Confirming the Saints (20:2-20:38)

We pick up momentum now as Paul moves out on the final leg of this third missionary journey. Throughout Paul’s brief visit with the Christians in Greece his ministry had been one of exhortation (20:2) and encouragement. But he was headed toward Jerusalem now. But just as he was about to take a boat bound for Syria, a plot against his life was exposed, and instead he headed back north from Corinth, overland, to Macedonia where he and a delegation from the churches there sailed from Neapolis to Troas (20:3-4).

And here he continues the ministry of encouragement and confirmation were necessary for the future of the Christian community in the Graeco-Roman world. Let’s watch now the method Paul uses in extending this part of his ministry as he moves toward Jerusalem.

First, we see confirmation through power in the incident involving Eutychus (20:7-12). The Christians at Troas came together for worship and to hear Paul. The communion service and the sermon were long. To stay awake young, Eutychus positioned himself in an open window in “the third loft” where he hoped the breeze off the Aegean would keep him awake. But after a time, he dozed off and fell to the floor below and was pronounced dead. But Luke then assures us that Paul took charge of things: ***“And Paul went down, and embracing him said, trouble not yourselves; for his life is in him” (20:10).*** What at first seemed to be an unnecessary tragedy was turned into another opportunity to glorify God and confirm the power of the gospel as Eutychus’ life was restored to him.

Confirmation through power is still a necessary ingredient in the strengthening of Christians. In a moment of discouragement, someone asked, “Why don’t we see miracles happening today like they did in the time of Paul?” On the surface this seems like a hard question to answer. But when we stop to really think about it on a deep level, we are reminded that God is at work in a miraculous way even in our world today. People are being touched by the power of the gospel and are being healed physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And this is happening wherever cold and formalized religion is replaced by the warm spirit of the early Church, where a long sermon and a healing miracle were compatible with the faith.

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This is not to say that we should try to manufacture miracles, by our definition. Jesus warned against that. Instead, our faith should have its roots in the kind of a power that says to people, “There is something powerful, transforming, and life-changing about Christianity.” May it be said of us as it was the disciples in Thessalonica, “These that have turned the world upside down.”

Next, we see that Paul brought about confirmation through proclamation. Paul is on the move again as he travels from Troas to Miletus. Here he wants a last visit with the elders of the Ephesian church, so he sends word and asks them to join him (20:17-35). In this farewell proclamation Paul stresses the importance of spiritual growth. The key verse in the speech is verse 32: ***“And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.”***

But let us look more closely now at this part of our lesson, for in it we see certain important ingredients of confirmation. Paul begins by referring to the credibility and integrity of his own life (20:18-20). He reminds the Ephesian elders of his faithfulness to God. In doing this he was not giving vent to egotism or self-centeredness. Instead, he was stating the simple fact that words and actions must go together. There can be no greater encouragement than to see God at work in the life of a fellow Christian. And in verse 21 he tells them, and us, that it is “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,” which makes that quality of life possible. In other words, exemplary living is made possible through extravagant grace.

Next, Paul reminds his Ephesian friends that adversity awaits him and all who follow in the way of Christ (20:23-29). Paul was moving toward Jerusalem although he knew that trouble and affliction was ahead. Verse 24 is a powerful testimony of the work of God in Paul’s life, ***“But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.”***

This benediction tells these friends that he probably will never see them again. But his words were more than a benediction—he knew they would face hard times, even as we do. The Bible gives us no assurance that the payoff for the Christian is a trouble free life, but we do have the assurance that God’s grace is equal to every part of life.

This witness of Paul’s is important for us today. There is sort of a “prosperity theology” going around that seems to encourage Christians to believe the illusion that God verifies the reality of faith by guaranteeing wealth, health, and other forms of

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material gain. And the reverse side of that coin says that if we are not enjoying these “blessings,” it is a sign of insufficient faith. But this goes against everything that Paul has taught us and what he says here.

Paul moves next to urge the Ephesian elders toward a high quality of leadership (20:28-32). The words, “take heed” and “feed the church” in verse 28 are important. In “taking heed” they and we are called to a life of watchfulness—we are to be sensitive to the subtleness of temptation. And the words, “feed the church” speak of the need to nurture people—each other—in the Lord. We are to build each other up and encourage each other. This attitude is the direct opposite of so much that we see. There is no room for infighting in an atmosphere of encouragement and love.

Paul is not home yet from this third missionary journey—that comes in the next lesson—but throughout this trip he has given us a powerful example of what it means to live and witness for Christ. Now in verse 36 we have the third aspect of Paul’s ministry, the confirmation of prayer. He is telling us that prayer is the lifeline and faith and strength. Prayer has sustained his life, it has empowered him for service, and it has strengthened him in times of suffering.

From Paul we learn that words are important, actions are important, but without prayer, nothing is important. It is helpful to remember this in our action-oriented society today. Paul knew that the best antidote to Christian burnout was prayer. Without prayer, we soon discover that we are just going through the motions—we respond and act out of habit. Like Samson in the Old Testament, the power had departed from us and we do not even know it (Judges 16:20).

By Paul’s words and actions in this closing scene, his Ephesian friends knew that prayer was the final and ultimate means of confirmation. For us the real purpose of prayer is not to get things but to get strength.

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