

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday June 25, 2023

Lesson 11: The Tolls of Ministry

Reference: Acts 18:1-22

When we last saw Paul, he was in Athens trying to convince a city full of idol-worshippers to worship the One True God. He also sent word for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens.

Acts Chapter 18 opens with Paul leaving for Corinth before the arrival of Silas and Timothy. However, the reference to Timothy and Silas' arrival in Acts 18:5 was not the arrival from Berea, but from independent mission trips to Macedonia after meeting Paul in Athens (see Timeline below). Luke informed us that Paul spent a total of 18 months in this city (Acts 18:11), during which the wear and tear of ministry was showing in Paul's life and in his drive for evangelism. It was during his stay in Corinth that Paul penned the two letters of 1 / 2 Thessalonians.

Timeline

A comparison of the movements of Paul and his coworkers described in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-10 with the accounts of Acts 17-18 suggests the following sequence of events that likely took place¹:

- Paul arrived in Athens having left Silas and Timothy behind in Berea (Acts 17:14)
- Paul left instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens as soon as possible (Acts 17:15)
- Silas and Timothy arrived in Athens (1 Thess 3:1)
- Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on the church (1 Thess 3:1-5)
- Paul sent Silas somewhere in Macedonia, possibly Philippi (Acts 18:5; Phil 4:10-20)
- Timothy and Silas returned to Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5; 1 Thess 3:6)

As it relates to 1 & 2 Thessalonians:

- Timothy reports to Paul about several concerns (1 Thess 3:6-10), prompting Paul to write 1 Thessalonians, sending Timothy to deliver the letter.
- Within weeks after the first letter, a false teacher with a forged letter allegedly from Paul infected the church (2 Thess 2:1-2), prompting Paul to write 2 Thessalonians. Timothy likely delivered that letter.

Ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17)

The city of Corinth was previously wiped out by Rome in 146 BC for its alignment with Rome's enemies. The city was not rebuilt immediately afterwards and the site lay largely unoccupied for over a century. However, due to its strategic location connecting major trade regions, Julius Caesar rebuilt the city and established it as a Roman colony in 44 BC. The city served as the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia – which encompasses Athens. Although predominantly a Roman cultural city, by the time of Paul's arrival, the influx of various outside ethnicities made Corinth very diverse and pluralistic. Religiously, with a pluralistic cultural influence, it had many religious co-existing side by side, housing numerous temples and various deities.

Upon arriving into the city, Paul would befriend a Jew named Aquila and his wife Priscilla. Likely unaware at the time, but these two individuals would forge a lifelong friendship with Paul, being mentioned in many of Paul's letters (Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19). The couple had been evicted from Rome by Claudius as part of the purging of Jews from Rome for the reason that the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (most likely Christ). Paul and Aquila also shared a common trade as tentmakers, so they partnered together to earn a living in the city.

¹ Clinton Arnold – Bible Backgrounds Commentary

Paul's attitude and demeanor coming into this city was distinctly different than his previous visits to cities from Philippi to Athens. Evidence that ministry had taken a toll on Paul can be found in his letter to the church in Corinth, when he recounted his first arrival (1 Cor 2:1-5 NIV):

¹ And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

Evidently, the churches he planted in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea came at a great personal cost to him physically and emotionally. The debates with the philosophers in Athens also took a toll. By the time he arrived in Corinth, he lacked the same rigor and enthusiasm for ministry. It's as if he needed a break. Although he still went to the synagogues on the Sabbath to reason with the Jews and Greeks, his ministry activities seem to be limited to just that. The "change the world" attitude has taken a back seat to simply doing ministry minimally.

Additionally, Paul may also lack funding to support the basic essentials for living, leading him to partner up with Aquila to make a living through tent making. When Silas and Timothy came back from Macedonia, not only did Timothy's report about the church in Thessalonica lifted Paul's spirit (1 Thess 3:6-8), they also brought funding support from Philippi (Phil 4:15-16), allowing Paul to now dedicate more of his time to preaching (Acts 18:5).

Church Planted in Corinth

When the Jews in the synagogue opposed Paul and became abusive, Paul gave them the customary dismissal, and proceeded to start a church right next to the synagogue (Acts 18:7). What was even more embarrassing for the Jews in the synagogue is that the leader of the synagogue at the time left his position and joined Paul's church (Acts 18:8).

These events must have played mind games with Paul, fearing a repeat of what happened in Thessalonica (cf 1 Cor 2:1-5). In response to Paul's fears, the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision one night, assuring and encouraging Paul to stay on track (Acts 18:9-10). With the city itself being a hodge-podge of a variety of deities and temples, Luke documents that Paul stayed the course planting this church in Corinth and protecting it from false teaching for 18 months (Acts 18:11).

In time, Paul's fears came to fruition as the Jews made a united attack on Paul, bringing him to Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia. This was effectively a repeat of what happened in Thessalonica, except in this case, the presiding judge is not a city official elected by the people; but one installed by Rome. Luke documents that as Paul was about to speak in defense of himself, his defense became unnecessary as Gallio dismissed the charges in whole as not relevant to Rome (Acts 18:14-15). This incident validated God's promise and encouragement to Paul about not being afraid and continue to speak (Acts 18:9-10). Unhappy with this dismissal, the Jews took their anger on the current leader of the synagogue – Sosthenes (Acts 18:17). This could be the same Sosthenes whom Paul referenced in the opening verse of Paul's letter of 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 1:1). If so, this event may have been a catalyst for his conversion.

Returning to Syrian Antioch

After 18 months in Corinth, Paul set sail for his return trip to Syrian Antioch. Aquila and Priscilla accompanied him. Luke documents that before he sailed, he had his hair cut off due to a vow he had taken. This vow is

known as a Nazirite vow (ref Num 6:1-21). By this special vow, a Jewish man pledged himself to the Lord's exclusive use to accomplish a specific objective. During this time, among other commitments, the individual agreed to allow his or her hair to go uncut. When a Jew sees a fellow Jewish man with long hair, they would recognize that as the sign of taking this vow. According to custom, the Jew taking this vow would have to deliver a special sacrifice to the temple to conclude the vow. For Paul, this means that he would need to go up to Jerusalem before returning to Syrian Antioch.

On the way back to Jerusalem, the team stopped in Ephesus, where Aquila and Priscilla disembarked. Their ministry will continue on from this city. Paul reasoned with the Jews in Ephesus for a brief time before heading to Jerusalem, then back to Syrian Antioch, officially ending his second missionary journey.

Analysis – Acts 18:1-22

From Luke's account of Paul's actions and attitude going into Corinth, it may be difficult to tell that Paul, by this time, was a worn-out minister. If not for Paul's own words in his letter to the church in Corinth (1 Cor 2:3), we may have simply assumed that Paul was merely forging a friendship / relationship with Aquila and Priscilla; or that he may have merely run out of funds and needed funding to continue the journey. However, Luke's account on the Lord speaking to Paul in a vision to "...not be afraid" (Acts 18:9) validates Paul's account in his letter to Corinth. Paul, having endured much beating and persecution with the threat of arrest, was clearly worn out and afraid to continue. His experience highlights the tolls of ministry and why we should be supportive of missionaries and those who work to advance the Gospel.

Looking at Paul at this point in his life, we can observe several things that missionaries need in order to continue the work of God in the mission field:

- They need encouragement – which Timothy provided with the good news from Thessalonica
- They need financial support – which Silas brought from Philippi, and before that, Paul had to earn it himself
- They need a supportive team – which God provided with Aquila and Priscilla, along with Titius Justus and Crispus; and before that, Silas, Timothy, and Luke.
- They need a safe space to rest – which Corinth provided. Note that Paul did not immediately leave for the next city to spread the gospel. He needed a safe place to rest and to establish stability.
- They need to spend time in the Word of God – to be assured that God is with them and not be fearful.

These needs, however, are not limited to the mission field. They apply to all ministries that advances the gospel message to the world. As such, the following principles applies as it relates to the tolls of ministry for the advancement of the Gospel message:

- **Doing ministry for the advancement of the Gospel message is a difficult task. Don't do it alone** – Jesus began his ministry by recruiting a team; Paul's mission journeys also operated with teams. Team members are needed not only to provide active support to share the burden, but also to provide encouragement and help with funding support. Before setting out on a mission or a ministry program, start by recruiting a team; then delegate team responsibilities to cover the various needs of the ministry for the long journey to counter the tolls of ministry. Control our zeal, and don't start without a team.
- **When doing ministry is wearing you out, wise to slow things down** – Paul was worn out by the time he arrived in Corinth. He needed time to rest and to establish some form of stability. This could explain why he spent so much time in Corinth, whereas in all of his previous stops, his zeal and his drive led him to move from city to city in much shorter time periods. Slowing things down should not be viewed as failing to do God's work. It simply means to be restored, or refueled. A worn out ministry worker is of little use, especially as a minister.

- **Always keep the God at the forefront of all your ministry decisions** – For God to speak to Paul in a vision to encourage him to press on speaks to Paul's state of mind at the time. Paul himself stated that he was fearful, and probably thinking about quitting, or possibly rolling back his activities. This is what the tolls of ministry can do to any minister – having endured all of the persecution and personal sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel. Therefore, ministers, pastors, and those leading ministry programs must always maintain a “God angle”, meditating on the Word of God daily and ensuring that key decisions are filtered through God in prayers, especially as it affects your ministry objective.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5. This is the portion of the letter where Paul recounts his initial days of ministry in the city of Corinth.

1. What were the challenges of sharing the Gospel message in that culture in Corinth? (1:26-29; 2:4-5)
2. What were the tendencies and practices of the leaders in that society on matters related to a “winning message?” (2:1)
3. How do you understand Paul's statement in verse 2:3 in light of Acts 18:1-22?

Reflecting Upon our World

Persecution from the Jews coupled with the physical and mental challenge of winning souls had driven much enthusiasm from Paul (wore him out).

1. What are some of the things / combination of things that can wear out a pastor, minister, or church leader today to the point where the individual becomes fearful possibly to the point of quitting ministry altogether (tolls of ministry)?
2. What are some of the things churches do today to help individuals overcome their tolls of ministry?
3. Gospel sharing was made more difficult in Corinth and in Athens due to the diversity of religious deities and culture. What are some of the challenges to Gospel sharing today that may require extra effort to reason with (the audience)?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

1. Recount the last time you had thoughts for quitting ministry. What were the circumstances that led you to this point? Journal your experience in a testimonial form.
2. How did you overcome your desire to quit? Or did you give in? If you can relive that moment, what would you do differently?
3. If you have lived through this experience, what would you say to a young leader who may be experiencing similar desires to quit due to the tolls of ministry? Journal your thoughts and be prepared to share with a young leader in the future.