

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

Frank E. Allen

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

33. PAUL AT EPHESUS (Acts 18:18-28; 19:1-20)

OUTLINE

Key verse - Acts 18:28; Acts 19:18

A review of the paragraph.

Paul went from Corinth to Ephesus (18-19) - Paul's vow (18) - establishing the disciples (22-23) - parts of two journeys (19-24) - Apollos (24-28) - description of Ephesus - a wide hearing (Acts 19:10) - exorcists defeated and convinced (Acts 19:13-19)

1. The value of thorough instruction in the Christian church.

A. Poorly informed disciples are not fitted to receive the Holy Spirit in power (Acts 19:1-7).

B. Poorly informed disciples are not fitted for Christian service (Acts 18:24-28; 19:1-7).

2. The importance of giving the Gospel a favorable hearing (Acts 18:19-21; 19:8-10).

3. The importance of the testimony of miracles to the Gospel (Acts 19:11-20).

4. The test of a true acceptance of Christ (Acts 19:18-19).

In the first part of the eighteenth chapter we learn of the work of Paul at Corinth. He remained there a year and a half. The passage before us tells principally of the ministrations of the apostle at Ephesus. There are two verses in this passage which record a visit of Paul to Jerusalem, Antioch and the region of Galatia and Phrygia.

PAUL'S VOW

Paul's haste in leaving Ephesus in order that he might perform a vow, apparently at Jerusalem, has been the subject of much conjecture. After the days of separation of a Nazarite were fulfilled he was to shave his head: "**And the Nazarite shall shave the head of his separation at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and shall take the hair of the head of his separation, and put it in the fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offerings**" (Numbers 6:18).

This is a possible explanation of the reason why Paul had his head shorn and was determined to go as quickly as possible to Jerusalem. It is useless to enter into a lengthy discussion of this matter since nothing definite can be decided concerning it. We suppose that Paul's vow was a proper one, if so it was very important that he should keep it.

ESTABLISHING THE DISCIPLES

A very important and somewhat extended work of Paul, in visiting the church at Antioch and those in Galatia and Phrygia, is passed over with a mere statement of the fact: "**And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up, and saluted the church, he went down to Antioch. 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**" (Acts 18:22, 23). It would take considerable time to do this, but it was time well spent. The disciples needed to be taught and better established in the faith. This work is not passed over without comment because it was unimportant, but because it was the purpose of the writer, guided by the Spirit, to record mainly the extension of the church and the opening of new fields. The fact is recorded of the repeated visits of Paul to localities where the Gospel had already been heard in order to show the importance of establishing newly made disciples in the faith.

PART OF TWO JOURNEYS

In this passage we have the last part of the second journey and the first part of the third journey recorded. When Paul, in company with Priscilla and Aquila, went from Corinth to Ephesus he was still engaged in the second journey. He taught at Ephesus but a short time in the synagogue, and, though they urged him to remain longer, he would not consent to do so at that time. He said he would return again to them if it was the Lord's will. He was permitted to return to Ephesus, where he remained longer than any other place in his ministry, and it is his work there on his third journey that the passage now under consideration mainly records. It also tells of Apollos at Ephesus and Corinth and how he was taught by Priscilla and Aquila.

APOLLOS

It was at Ephesus that we first hear of Apollos. He was an eloquent and learned man. He was well informed in the Scriptures, which at that time meant the Old Testament Scriptures. He was fervent in spirit and did the best that he knew in teaching the things concerning Jesus. However, he had gotten no more than John the Baptist had taught. He did not know that Jesus had risen from the dead, that the Holy Spirit had been given, and that Jesus had ascended. It seems that he did not know that Jesus had come and died upon the cross. Though Apollos was a learned man he was ready to be taught. It was fortunate that there were those at Ephesus who could teach him. Priscilla and Aquila, who had been taught of Paul, could teach Apollos. They "**expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly**" (Acts 18:26). He received their teaching with all meekness and continued to be a fervent and eloquent preacher.

When he decided to go into Achaia the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples urging them to receive him. He was a great help to them there, not only in helping those who had believed, but in confuting the Jews, “**and that publicly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ**” (Acts 18:28).

EPHESUS

Ephesus was the metropolis of proconsular Asia. It was situated about a mile from the Aegean Sea, fronting an artificial harbor in which ships from all lands met. Above Ephesus rose the temple of Artemis (Diana), celebrated as the most magnificent building in Asia Minor. In fact this temple was regarded as one of the wonders of the world. The idol was an ugly figure, said to have resembled an Egyptian mummy. The worshippers of this goddess accepted the popular legend that it had fallen from heaven and looked upon it with the greatest veneration.

Ephesus was rich, corrupt, and full of idolatry. Its religion had been commercialized. The merchants had made the temple of Artemis their banking house. It was polluted with sorcery and witchcraft. “Its markets,” as Farrar says, “glittering with the produce of the world’s art, were the Vanity Fair of Asia.” The very worship was unspeakably vile. Magical imposters, sorcerers and exorcists were trafficking in all kinds of evil and immorality. No wonder, when Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, that he urged them to put on the whole armor of God that they might be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. “**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).

A WIDE HEARING

There were different factors which contributed to a wide hearing of the Gospel during the three years that Paul was in Ephesus. Paul spoke to the Jews in the synagogue, making that his headquarters for three months. When some of the hardened and disobedient among them began to oppose the preaching there he called upon the disciples to separate from the synagogue and meet in the school of Tyrannus. There he taught daily for two years. As a result, we are told, “**all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks**” (Acts 19:10). The reference to Asia here evidently means proconsular Asia.

This is a brief statement, but a very remarkable one. The opportunity for spreading the Gospel through proconsular Asia came partly because of the travelers who came to and from Ephesus. There would be multitudes passing through Ephesus every year who would hear Paul preach and who would bear the message home with them.

The twelve disciples whom Paul taught, apparently ordained, and upon whom the Holy Spirit came so that they spake with tongues and prophesied, no doubt had much to do with the rapid spread of the Gospel through this part of Asia. In all probability, the seven churches named in the book of Revelation were founded at this time. Paul may have gone out from Ephesus to preach at other places as well as in the city proper.

THE SPIRIT'S PLAN BEST

We can now see that the plan of the Holy Spirit was best when he called Paul from Asia Minor across to Europe. It would have been according to Paul's plan to have evangelized the provinces of Asia Minor first. There were many hindrances then, and it was the divine plan that the Gospel should be carried farther afield into Europe. After churches had been planted in Europe there was a greater opening in Asia. Moreover, there were more missionaries to help publish the Gospel in proconsular Asia. Thus foreign mission work helped to stimulate the work at home, and western Asia probably heard the Gospel more quickly than if Paul had not gone to Europe.

Paul wrote to Corinth from Ephesus, **"For a great door and effectual is opened unto me"** (I Corinthians 16:9). It was indeed a great door and effectual when **"all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks."** The very adversaries, those who attempted to imitate Paul and those who raged against him, no doubt helped to advertise the new message which Paul proclaimed.

THE VALUE OF THOROUGH INSTRUCTION

There is a great value in thorough instruction in the Christian church. The early history of Apollos is a witness to this fact. He was earnest, diligent and eloquent but still he was of little if any value to the church until he was instructed more accurately by Aquila and Priscilla. The disciples of Apollos whom Paul found at Ephesus, upon his return, were also well-meaning men but they had no clear conception of faith in Christ until they were taught by Paul.

NOT FIT TO RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

Disciples who are so poorly informed are not fitted to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul said to the disciples of Apollos: **"Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost"** (Acts 19:2). They probably had heard of the concept of the Holy Spirit for John the Baptist had spoken of Him and they knew John's teaching. They did not know of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, therefore likely nothing of the crucifixion and the resurrection. Under such circumstances men could not honor the Holy Spirit. They would not know to ask for His power. The Holy Spirit would not come upon men in power who did not know how to use that power if they had it. Their belief was imperfect. Their baptism was imperfect, and their preaching was imperfect.

After they were instructed of Paul, baptized, and had received the enduement of the Holy Spirit they manifested His power by speaking with tongues and prophesying. The Holy Spirit evidently made use of them after that in a wonderful way in making known the Gospel to all that part of Asia. Thus there is a relationship between knowledge and power. One may have knowledge without power, but one is not given power unless he has a knowledge of the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

NOT FITTED FOR CHRISTIAN SERVICE

Poorly informed disciples are not fitted for Christian service. Apollos was teaching but he was leading others astray, not because he was willfully wrong but because of what he lacked. We are not told distinctly that the twelve disciples whom Paul found at Ephesus were disciples of Apollos but the inference seems to be that they were. They, at least, had been led into error and the work of teaching had to be done over again. A teacher poorly informed, not familiar with the essentials of the Christian religion, cannot produce disciples any better than himself. Although such a teacher may be sincere and ready to learn, those who are taught by him are likely to feel that they have a satisfactory religion and organize themselves into an heretical sect. It is especially important that leaders in the church be well instructed, but it is also important that all members shall be well informed in the Bible, for from the members come the future teachers and leaders in the church. It is sometimes said that conscience is a sufficient guide, but this is manifestly a mistake; for conscience, if not enlightened, may lead men into the wildest excesses and most brutal actions. A Hindu said to a British administrator in India, "Our consciences tell us to burn our widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands," and the Englishmen replied: "our consciences tell us to hang you if you do."

We may not expect anything new in the way of revelation, but everyone has more to learn of that which is already revealed. As the astronomer looks into space he does not expect that any new worlds shall be formed to please his imagination, but he does expect to learn more about those which have been formed ages ago and possibly to discover some new facts about them which others have overlooked and failed to record. The truth of God reaches higher than the starry sky and there is always something new for every one who will search for the riches within its limits.

GIVING THE GOSPEL A HEARING

It is important that men shall give the Gospel a favorable hearing. One is impressed with the first desire of the Ephesians to have Paul remain with them. When he told them he must leave they urged him to remain for a longer period. When he came back and reasoned in the synagogue for three months some became ardent Christians, but some became hardened and opposed the Gospel. Paul thought it wise to leave the synagogue and teach in the school of Tyrannus.

One wonders why they asked him to stay at first and later to leave. Perhaps they were not the same individuals who first asked him to stay that later asked him to leave. Possibly those who wanted him to leave had never been sympathetic with him. Perhaps there was a curiosity which attracted them at first, but when they found what the message included they were repelled. This was the condition which prevailed when Jesus first began to teach; there were many who followed Him who later turned back and opposed Him. This was a common occurrence in the mission work of Paul. We blame the Jews for prejudice and hardness because they did not want to give up their ceremonies for Christ. There are many today who listen curiously at first, but who are hardened and will not give up the sins in which they are engrossed. The sin of such men may be a desire to make money wrongfully; it may be an unwillingness to give up some worldly pleasure; it may be an old prejudice against some Christian in the church or it may be an unwillingness to search the Scriptures in order to prove the truth.

It is said that Demosthenes upon one occasion, when speaking to the Athenians upon a very serious subject and finding them inattentive, paused and told them that he had something of special importance to tell them which he was anxious that they should hear. When he had thus obtained silence and every eye was fixed upon him he said that two men, who had bargained for the hire of an ass, were traveling from Athens to Megara on a very hot day and both of them strove to walk in the shadow of the ass. One of them said that he had hired the ass and the shadow too; the other said that his friend had hired the ass only and not the shadow. When Demosthenes had made this statement he retired, and when the people pressed him to return and finish his tale, he said: "O ye Athenians! will you attend to me when speaking about the shadow of an ass; and will ye not attend to me when I address you upon the most important affairs?"

What message can be more important than the Gospel? Its promises are most blessed and its threats most terrible, and yet men will revel in all sorts of unimportant jests while they reject the Gospel and the Gospel messenger. It is a very serious and dangerous matter to trifle with the offer of salvation through Christ. Men who resist the Gospel may go until there is no hope. Why not hear and receive Christ today?

THE TESTIMONY OF MIRACLES

The importance of the testimony of miracles to the Gospel is here recorded: "**And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them**" (Acts 19:11,12). The handkerchief was, literally, a sweat-cloth, and the apron was a narrow apron which Paul wore at his work. These were therefore garments which Paul used at his work.

Some vagabond Jews, exorcists, tried to imitate Paul and the miracles which God thus performed. The effort of seven brothers, who were conjurers, to cast out evil spirits is given here as an example. They were sons of a Jew by the name of Sceva and were chief among the priests. They commanded an evil spirit to come out of a man in the name of Jesus whom Paul preached. One effort of this kind was enough for these false priests, for, the man in whom the evil spirit was said: "**Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye? And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this was known to all the Jews and Greeks also dwelling at Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified**" (Acts 19:15-17).

It was a plan, in the providence of God, to prove the trickery and deception of the magicians and to cause men to fear and honor God. The influence of these magicians was the greatest hindrance to the Gospel in Ephesus. Their influence was greatly lessened by this incident. Devils cannot cast out devils, as the Pharisees insisted that Jesus did. Demons are not ready to give up to one another. There seems to be a prince of the devils, at least the Pharisees thought there was, but it is not likely that evil spirits obey him except when it suits them. There is nothing to assure us that evil spirits are subject to their prince as angels are subject to God. It is not the nature of evil spirits to obey, as is manifest in this incident.

These seem to be strange miracles. The Word states that they were special miracles. It states very clearly also that God wrought these miracles. It was no more difficult for God to work miracles of this sort than by any other means. We wonder at these: we wonder at all miracles. The reason why we wonder is because we fail to appreciate God's power and God's knowledge of law. God does not necessarily change or break any laws in order to perform miracles. He knows the working of a vast multitude of laws which we do not know. He can bring into play any one or more of these laws at any moment that He so desires. The man who thinks that a finite mind may have a grasp of and control over all law denies the reality and possibility of miracles. Such a man does not change the fact; he merely shows his own failure to understand the fact. R.J. Dodds, in his early days of mission work in Syria, astonished the natives by showing them how he could remove and replace his false teeth. To them it seemed like a miracle. It was beyond the realm of their knowledge or understanding and seemed to them impossible. For them to deny the fact that the missionary could replace and use his teeth did not change the fact. No more does it change the fact for us to deny that a miracle is beyond the realm of our understand or power has been actually performed.

Men could not but admit that the miracles wrought by the hands of Paul were from God. Others could not imitate them who did not exercise faith in God. The object of miracles is to cause men to fear and to see the evidence of the great power of God that they may believe on Him. Not all who saw miracles performed would believe, but they caused many to believe and made others stand in awe of God.

We say, no wonder that the Word of God grew mightily and prevailed. With preaching like that of Paul accompanied by the wonderful manifestation of the power of God it would be strange if there were not many who believed. The evils of our day will give way before true, earnest preaching by the power of the Holy Spirit, but they will not retreat before the harangues of mammon worshippers. If we are to have power with God we must be clean and we must be men of faith. Today we have the testimony of miracles and we have the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is just as powerful to convince and convert as He was in the days of Paul.

Dr. Griffith Thomas used to tell of a poor old negro who was a hopeless drunkard, and who had tried again and again to get free, and others had tried to help him, but he could not get rid of his drunkenness until he was converted. When he was converted there was a wonderful change and someone said: "So you have got the mastery of the devil at last?" "No," he said, "but I have got the Master of the devil." It is well if we take hold of the Master of the devil in faith and we shall, by His grace, be enabled to gain the mastery of the devil.

THE TEST OF TRUE BELIEVERS

We have here the test of a true acceptance of Christ. By their works ye shall know them. Many of the diviners and necromancers of Ephesus, men who were converted, brought their devices for practicing magical arts and **"brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver"** (Acts 19:19). This would amount to about ten thousand dollars in our money (1931).

It would therefore be no small conflagration. It would no doubt mean the loss of a fortune to many. It would also mean the giving up of their means of making a living. They did not wait to see whether they could hold out, but gave them up at once because they saw that they were wrong and could not please God and continue in a business which was wrong. In that they were manifestly right and were an example to multitudes of professed Christians today.

Canon Aitkin tells of an experience in the following language: "I had been preaching a strong sermon on the possibility of deliverance from sin, and as I came out of the church a young man said to me he could not go with me in my teaching. He could not accept it as God's truth. "Well," I asked, "what do you think is God's truth?" "It seems to me," said the young man, "God's way is gradually to deliver us from our sins." I looked into his face, paused for a moment, and then said, "Is that your theory about pocket-picking?" "About what?" said he. "About pocket-picking. A pickpocket is converted to God. Do you expect after a week's experience he will kneel down and say, O God I thank thee for the great and glorious change that has come over me. Last week I stole twenty watches and twenty-four purses. This week I have only stolen a dozen?" The young man looked rather confused. I said, "No dear brother, what you expect is, let him that stole steal no more. You expect God's grace to conquer his besetting sin, and why don't you expect God to find grace for you to break off your besetting sin whatever it may be? If you do not expect the thief to go on relapsing into dishonesty, why expect that you yourself are to go on falling and relapsing into your besetting sin? There is complete deliverance."

Dr. W.M. Taylor reminds us of an incident told by Mr. Aurther in his memoir of Samuel Budgett, the Successful Merchant. Like other grocers of his time he had been in the habit of adulterating his pepper by some sort of preparation which, though harmless, was not pepper. He had kept it in a barrel labeled P.D. - pepper dust. When he became an earnest Christian his conscience troubled him. He could not sleep nor could he have peace of mind during the day. So one night he arose from his bed, went to the store, took the little barrel with him out to an old quarry and there knocked in the ends of it and left it. That ended the sale of P.D. for him. Is there nothing of curious arts or P.D. left with any of us? Have we never assumed piety for the sake of influence? Are we ready to give up all sorts of evil entanglements, Christless organizations and alliances which draw us into evil for the sake of our Lord? John Ruskin once said that anything which makes religion its second object makes religion no object. God will put up with a great many things in the human heart, but there is one thing He will not put up with in it - a second place. He who offers God a second place offers Him no place at all.

When we take Christ as our Saviour let us yield implicitly to Him. Let us give up the things that tempt us so that we may not be tempted again. The temptation for money, for honor, for power, are all strong temptations. The Ephesians Christians were willing to set aside all of these for Christ. It would likely not be easier, perhaps not as easy, for the Christians to find new employment in Ephesus where Christians were hated, as it would be for a man who has been a drunkard or a gambler to find a new position at which to make a living today. Wherever men and women are willing to make such sacrifices for Christ as the Ephesians did in order to live the Christian life and make their testimony public it will have a vast influence upon men of the world. We may expect the word of the Lord to grow mightily and to prevail as it did at Ephesus. Consecrated lives together with faithful testimony will always bear fruit.

**“Jesus Master! yes we love Thee, and,
to prove our love would lay
Voice and substance Thou hast given at
Thy blessed feet today.
Many an effort may it cost us, many a
heartbeat, many a fear,
But thou knowest, and wilt strengthen,
and Thy help is always near.
Give us grace to follow fully, vanquishing our faithless shame,
Feebly it may be, but truly, witnessing
for Thy dear name.”**

**QUESTIONS
(Acts 18:18-28; 19:1-20)**

1. Where had Paul been before going to Ephesus?
2. Why did he leave Ephesus at the close of his second journey?
3. Where did he go before returning to Ephesus?
4. What did he do during that time?
5. Of what value were Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus?
6. What were the excellencies of Apollos at first?
7. What were his limitations?
8. How did he rank in the church after he was well informed?
9. Tell of Ephesus, its importance and its religion?
10. How wide a hearing did Paul have with Ephesus as a center?
11. Who were apparently his main assistants as evangelists?
12. Why are poorly informed disciples not fitted to receive the power of the Holy Spirit?
13. Why are such disciples not fitted for Christian service?
14. Why is not conscience a sufficient guide?
15. What is the apparent reason why the Ephesian Jews received the Gospel favorably at first and rejected it later?
16. Why were special miracles wrought at Ephesus?
17. How do miracles testify to the Gospel?
18. Is there any evidence to show that devils can cast out devils?
19. What evidence did the Ephesian Christians give that they were truly converted?
20. What effect does such consecration and testimony always have?

~ end of chapter 33 ~

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