

Saved by Grace

Week Commencing 29 May 2023

Notes for next week's sermon on Acts 18 – Proving from the Scriptures that Jesus is Messiah

The common threads throughout this chapter is that of teaching and correction; and spiritual encouragement. Paul received a spiritual blessing – a vision and he and others were able to be a blessing in so many ways all throughout the chapter. That some teaching takes hold and other times it doesn't also shouldn't surprise us and it's clearly emphasised by Luke as he reports on all that's going on. All the key characters introduced have good knowledge but also incomplete knowledge – they believe in God but don't necessarily know Jesus or fully understand Him. It's a great chapter! The clear question that should be in each of our minds as we read is: 'are we confident enough in our knowledge of the Scripture that we could refute or debate what we believe in our hearts'? Challenging, isn't it? – but a worthy pursuit!

DAY 1: Read Acts 18:1-6

Corinth and Ephesus were the two most important cities visited by Paul in the course of his missionary work, and he stayed in each for a considerable period in order to establish churches which would then evangelise the surrounding areas. Paul devoted himself entirely to the task of preaching the word. According to 2 Corinthians 11:9 Paul did not burden the local church financially while he was there, since his needs were supplemented by the Christians from Macedonia. Therefore, we can read in this brief line that not only was Paul teaching and challenging regarding Jesus as the Messiah not just in the Synagogue on the Sabbath – but every day. Fruit came from this – but so too did opposition. Paul was no stranger to opposition, but it seems that by verse 6 enough had been said against him to cause him to pack up and finish trying to convince the Jews there, so he turned his attention to Gentiles. Those who gathered in the Synagogue just couldn't be brought over to believe; and for this 'their blood was on their own heads!' (verse 6). Strong words.

I had a conversation just this week with minister from another denomination who persevered in his ministry for years, only to be worn down by the negativity of 'gatekeepers' in his larger congregation. The change and direction he wanted to take the church just didn't fit their outlook, so they dug their heels in and refused to support it. At first, I thought perhaps he was being unfaithful by packing up and looking to a new ministry for this reason, but as I listened I could hear a lack of graciousness and support for him becoming harder and harder to bear. The Gospel was being faithfully preached, but the Grace of receiving it and the willingness of those listening just wasn't there. It is a well-equipped, large church that is looking down the barrel of a slow decline because of stubborn hearts. He was right to 'shake the dust of his shoes and leave that place'. How hard it must have been for him – and how hard too for Paul to leave those who were so near to knowing the truth and yet so unwilling to cross the line. How willing are we to hear and receive the good news of Jesus??

DAY 2: Read Acts 18:7-17

Since the work in the Synagogue was no longer possible, Paul also turned elsewhere for a place to teach and preach and found it in the house of a Gentile who was a member of the Synagogue. *Titus Justus* is a Roman name; and that this Roman's house was right next door to the Synagogue can hardly have led to good relationships with the Jews, but Paul picked the location wisely – and verse 8: “many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptised.” Not only that – but ‘the very leader of the Synagogue believed – along with his entire household.’ Fantastic! It must have been infuriating for the Jews – seeing their leader go over to Paul's side! Indeed – by verse 17 we see that he was beaten by the other Jews. Before that happens, Paul receives a vision (verse 9 and 10). It must have been a relief for him to have this incredible affirmation of the work that was taking place; and a relief to know that the same militantly hard hearts that he had encountered elsewhere weren't going to be realised in Corinth. In fact we know from 1 Corinthians 2:3 that Paul arrived in Corinth fearful; expecting reprisals for his presence there. Likely, had he not received that divine encounter, he would only have stayed a short time and the church and subsequent letters that made it into our Bible would not have come about! How incredible to think that God's intervention has led to such great encouragement for the church in Corinth and indeed for all Churches and Christians who have benefited from reading his letter to the Corinthians.

DAY 3: Read Acts 18:18-23

In the course of the next few verses, Luke compresses a considerable amount of journeying by Paul which took him from Corinth to Ephesus, to Jerusalem and Antioch, then back to Ephesus (pew!) where he entered the next main phase of his missionary work. Almost as an aside, is recorded that when Paul reached Cenchreae he cut his hair as part of a vow. Jews made vows to God either in thankfulness for past blessings (such as Paul's safekeeping in Corinth) or as part of a petition for future blessings (such as the impending journey). There were other vows and reasons for doing so but one of these is the most likely, given the location. Paul spent some time at Antioch before beginning the next stretch of his journey. His goal was Ephesus and he went there by the inland route, taking the opportunity to visit in turn the various groups of Christians formed on earlier missionary journeys and to give them spiritual encouragement. What a delight for Paul to be able to spend time with the men and women who were also part of this unstoppable force of the Holy Spirit. The seeds they planted would grow far beyond what they could even comprehend. I wonder if maybe we are too cautious in our thinking about how our Church will grow. Are we as zealous for the Gospel as these men and women who, with the support and encouragement of Paul, spread the Gospel in an adverse environment?

DAY 4: Read Acts 18:24-28

Ephesus was the main city of the Roman province of Asia, situated at the mouth of the River Cayster on an important trade route inland. It had a large Jewish population, but also had a famous temple to the goddess Artemis along with numerous other cultures and religions – as was often the case along central trade routes. Before Luke takes up the story of Paul's return to Ephesus and his work there, he adds the account of Apollos, who though keen, didn't have a total and full understand of the Gospel. Priscilla and Aquila looked after that and their correction of him led only to him wanting to know more – to be more and to help those “who through grace had believed” (verse 27). Apollos clearly had a good understanding of the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) and his knowledge of them helped him argue faithfully for Christ and spiritually and pastorally support the community after he crossed to Achaia. Often, people with full heads deny the needs of their hearts – but Apollos didn't. He must have been gracious in listening to the explanation by Priscilla and Aquila; allowing them to correct and guide him. This led him to do wonderful things for the Kingdom of God. I wonder we are as gracious as we need to be – not just willing to be theologically corrected but spiritually guided – in order that we may be able to correct and guide others both theologically and spiritually. Pray for open and ready hearts, ready to grow and learn new things from God's word!