

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - PART NINETEEN - CHAPTERS 18 AND 19

From the intellectual atmosphere of Athens Paul moved into another world. Corinth was a fast moving centre of commerce with an equally fast moving night life. It was a city of about 700,000, some 500,000 of whom were slaves. Situated on a narrow isthmus, between the Adriatic and the Aegean seas, over which ships were dragged on rollers to avoid the dangerous waters to the south, it commanded crossroads of trade. The Corinthians were preoccupied with two things, making money and spending it. To 'live like a Corinthian' was a saying in the Roman Empire that described 'living it up'. The temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, had 1000 cult prostitutes. Corinth had a large Jewish community. In such a city where does one begin to share the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The answer according to Paul was twofold - first in the work place and secondly in the home. He immediately began to do both by taking a live-in job with a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla. Working alongside Paul as a tentmaker, Aquila had every opportunity through the quality of his work, his honesty as an employee, and his Christ-like character to see that the message he shared was true. Priscilla had the same opportunity to see kindness and helpfulness in the home from her boarder. Perhaps over the meal table they talked endlessly of the Christ of the Old Testament and Paul's claim that He was Jesus. Somewhere in this time Priscilla and Aquila put their trust in Christ. (18:1-4)

Paul frequently emphasised how he made it a practice to work for his support with his own hands, (20:34; I Cor.4:12) rather than charge for the gospel. In Corinth however Paul demonstrated that this was not just sound advice for Christian workers but that joining the work force was a great way to get alongside working people.

The first base for the Christian church in Corinth was the home of Priscilla and Aquila. There people found love and acceptance, and heard the truth. When they moved on later with Paul, (18:18) Priscilla and Aquila had already established a habit they maintained wherever they went. (I Cor.16:19; Rom.16:3-5; II Tim.4:19)

When the Jews rejected Paul's message he refused to 'throw pearls before swine', (Matt.7:6) used an Old Testament expression to indicate that they alone were responsible for their position before God at judgement, and moved on. Titius Justus as a 'worshipper of God' would be another Greek like Lydia (16:14) who

had been drawn to the Jewish faith, but now saw that the Old Testament Christ was Jesus. His home became the second base for the Corinthian church. Being right next to the synagogue no doubt irritated the Jews greatly. (18:5-7)

Paul's ministry in the synagogue was not wasted. Crispus, the Jewish leader, and his family were converted. Presumably his home became the third house church. From these three homes the gospel reached many people who put their trust in the Lord. (18:8) Sharing Christ at work and making people welcome in the home, leading them to Christ and teaching them there, is still the obvious way to reach a busy city where people tend to avoid large public meetings.

The Lord gave Paul special reassurance that he should continue teaching in Corinth for what, for him, was an unusually long time. At first sight it is a puzzle that after so much good teaching the first Corinthian letter written only a couple of years later from Ephesus should show so many problems in the church so soon. Because of the intense pressure of life in a place like Corinth it is likely that the church would not have survived at all had Paul not stayed for 18 months to give them a solid grounding. (18:9-11) When he did write his letter of rebuke he knew that he could remind the struggling believers to draw on resources of understanding within them. (I Cor.1:4-9)

Finally, as so often before, trouble broke out with the religious people. Gallio is well known from Roman history. He was proconsul in Corinth between 51-53AD. His action in throwing the case against Paul out of court demonstrates how even an ungodly legal system may protect our freedom to preach Christ. Order gives greater opportunity than chaos and anarchy. (Rom.13:1-7) The Jews beat up their new leader and advocate in court, Sosthenes, who later came to Christ. (I Cor.1:1) No-one ever had a clearer indication that he had been on the wrong side! (18:12-17)

When God was ready, Paul moved on making a brief visit to Ephesus where he planted two special agents, Priscilla and Aquila, to prepare for his return. God knew the right time for the gospel to come to Ephesus and Paul was prepared to wait. (18:18-21) We have all kinds of worthy plans which we spoil by not waiting for God's time.

In Cenchrea Paul may have met Phoebe who later carried his letter to Rome. (Rom.16:1,2) He never missed an opportunity to share Christ even when he was having a haircut. (18:18) After a further time with his home church, Paul began his third journey. (18:22,23)

Meanwhile back in Ephesus his two friends were having an exciting ministry to preachers. Apollos knew his Bible, the life of Jesus, and the ministry of John the Baptist but something vital was missing. Priscilla and Aquila took him aside, probably to their home, to fill two gaps in his understanding. Firstly he did not know that the Jesus of the gospels was the Christ of the Old Testament, and secondly that we can be baptised, not just in water, but by the Holy Spirit, into the body of Christ. In other words we can know Jesus Christ personally as God for today. We too can be used by God if we listen carefully, and speak graciously and positively to help confused preachers. Apollos later went over to Corinth where he had a fruitful ministry. (18:24-28; I Cor.1:12; 3:4,6; 4:6; 16:12)

Ephesus at last! Ephesus was probably the hardest place in which Paul ever worked, for reasons we shall see. Yet of all the letters he later wrote, the one to the Ephesians is the only one that does not have to deal with problems in the church. How could that have been?

19:1-7 Q.1 What do we know about the understanding and spiritual condition of these twelve disciples? Whose disciples were they? What did Paul teach them which they did not previously know? What must have been their response? What two things did Paul do to them? What would each action have meant to them in the light of where they stood spiritually? When did they actually become Christians? (Rom.6:1-11; 8:9; I Pet.5:6)

19:6,7 Q.2 What three things did God do when Paul laid hands on the 12 disciples? Comparing this account with 2:1-4 and 10:44-47, what in practical terms do these three expressions mean? What tongues did they speak in? What bearing did God's work in their lives have on the task of reaching Ephesus and the surrounding province with the gospel?

19:8,9 Q.3 What was Paul's approach in the synagogue of Ephesus? In what three ways did their rejection of the gospel show? What can we learn from his withdrawal from the synagogue about when we should move out of an unresponsive group of people?

19:9,10 Q.4 What were the key features of Paul's Bible School in Ephesus? Are they relevant today? How would all the residents of the province of Asia have heard the word of the Lord?

19:11,12 Q.5 Why do you suppose God used Paul to do far more miracles in Ephesus than anywhere else? What does this show us about His wisdom and sovereignty? What kind of miracle can we be confident God will do through us if we consistently teach His word?

19:13-20 Q.6 What does this story tell us about the dangers of imitation in Christian ministry and about the right and wrong place of casting out demons? (Matt.12:43-45) Is it up to us to try expose imitators as fakes? Satanism and spiritism in all its forms were rife in Ephesus. What means did God use to persuade people to renounce these things and burn their books? How therefore should we deal with such problems in our communities today?

19:21 Q.7 What indication does this verse give us as to how God guides us in the short, medium and long term? Under what circumstances would Paul eventually 'see Rome'? Do you think he knew of these circumstances at this time?

19:22 Q.8 What do we know about the two helpers Paul sent ahead to Macedonia? (16:1-3; I Cor.4:17; 16:10,11; II Cor.1:1,19; I Tim.1:2; II Tim.1:2-6; 4:20; Rom.16:23.) Why would they have been good choices to prepare for his coming?

19:23-28 Q.9 What was the real reason for the anti-Christian riot in Ephesus? What excuses did the silversmiths make? What can we learn from this story about why we will be persecuted if we teach the word of God clearly and publicly?

19:29-41 Q.10 What can we learn from the outcome of the riot about the value of an ordered society even if it is godless? Consider what would have been the emotions of Gaius, Aristarchus, Paul and his friends at the time of the riot? Did it matter whether Paul did or did not enter the theatre where the riot was occurring?