

do anything. The message was clear; without faith in Christ, all their religion had no worth. They were unsaved, and still captives to Satan himself. Without Christ, there is no true religion - because he is the sum and substance of it all.

Let us also see from these verses that *true conversion involves costly repentance*. Events in Ephesus had clearly shown that Christ was Lord. The extraordinary events had shown that it was necessary to obey him. The "name of the Lord Jesus was magnified" and "fear fell on them all" (verse 17). And the results of this fear in those who believed are written down for us. The Holy Spirit has made special note of it. "As many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds" (verse 19). Some of them had been involved in magic and sorcery, which was common in their town. When they were converted, though, they gave that all up - and publicly. They brought all the aids they had used in their magic, and had them burned "in the sight of all". They repented - openly turning from their evil deeds. They now saw everything about it as ungodly and displeasing to Christ, and knew that they must decisively break from it. The value of their books was extremely great - fifty thousand silver pieces in all. But they did not seek to sell them, and make nice-sounding excuses about how the money could be used for the Lord's work. They saw that they were all wicked, and could only be destroyed.

True repentance is the chief evidence that conversion is real. True repentance is not easy to fake. It must be in the matters which have been our sins before; in must be definite and specific. A few general words admitting that somehow, somewhere, we have sinned, will not do. A general desire to please God is not the same thing. We must take costly steps to distance ourselves from the actual and real sins which have dominated our lives. If these sins have been public, then our turning from them must be public too. If this costs us a great deal and makes life very hard for us, then we must do it. Why? Because Jesus is Lord. If we truly understand the greatness of his name, and the awesome power to save or to damn that is in his hands, then the cost will seem a little thing to us. It is nothing compared to the cost of rebelling against Christ and making him our enemy. It is when we see things as we really are, that we will see sin as something to get away from as fast and clearly as we can. So, we must count the cost - and bow to Jesus Christ.

Expository thoughts on **The Acts Of The Apostles**

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 14 (Chapter 18:4-19:20)

Grace Church Belper

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Acts 18:4-11

4 And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks. 5 When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. 6 But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." 7 And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshipped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. 8 Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptised. 9 Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; 10 for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city." 11 And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

Now we read about Paul's evangelism in Corinth. Corinth was the capital of the province, and had 200,000 people. It was wealthy city, but also full of great wickedness. To this city, Paul came to preach the good news about the Lord Jesus. These verses have a good deal to teach us about how to spread the word. Let us study them well!

First of all these words show us that *evangelism involves reasoning and persuasion*. Paul was at this time supporting himself, making tents with his own hands (verse 3). But on the Sabbath days, he went into the synagogue to preach to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who met there. And the Holy Spirit has especially noted how Paul preached. As he preached he "reasoned"; and the result was he "persuaded".

God has made men and women in his own image (Genesis 1:26). They are made infinitely greater than the animal kingdom, having minds which are able to think great thoughts. We do far more than think just enough to feed, survive and reproduce. We have been made to consider reality, eternity and God. And though our thinking is ruined by the fall, our nature as thinking creatures has not changed. Because of all this, the gospel is addressed first to our minds. False religions can sway and manipulate people's feelings and emotions; but this does not honour God. The truth must go much deeper down than our minds - changing our wills, and ruling in our hearts; but it must go in through the mind. Unless truth is received through the mind, it cannot be received at all. The devil understands this very well, which is why he is so eager to spoil the church with false teaching.

True evangelism must, then, involve reasoning and persuading - seeking to show people that the gospel makes sense, and truly addresses the real human need. We must speak to people with words that they can understand, and work with them from where they are. It is no good to tell the most wonderful message, if it goes over the top of their heads. An evangelist is not being faithful if he talks past his hearers, or talks down to

grew mightily and prevailed.

Luke tells us about one more notable event at Ephesus. Paul was there for two years (verse 10), and many "unusual miracles" happened through him at that time. There were powerful signs, announcing that he was God's apostle, and that his words were true. Wonderful healings were done by him. The wonderful work of the Saviour in the soul of every one who comes to him was illustrated on a large scale. The power of Christ over all evil was proclaimed.

These verses tell us very clearly that *Christ's name is to be revered and honoured*. There was great power in the name of Jesus at Ephesus, as Paul preached and performed miracles. Evil spirits were being cast out, and many were deeply impressed. But there were some, "Jewish exorcists", who thought that they could use the name of Christ for their own ends. They were not believers in Christ, or preachers of the gospel. They simply saw in this name one more name alongside the many others which they had used in their exorcisms. They saw a name that was extremely powerful - more so than any other. But in the end, they still saw just a name to be used and manipulated to their own will. But they learnt an awful lesson when they did so! An evil spirit gave them more than they bargained for. He knew of Jesus - the Lord of all; and knew of Paul - Christ's chosen apostle - and he feared and trembled at their names; but of the Jewish exorcists, he knew nothing. These Jews then had to run for their lives!

The lesson from this was clear. Christ is not a magical power, or a mere name among other earthly names. He is the Lord of all who rules and reigns, and works according to his own will. He is the living Lord, to whom we must bow. We cannot manipulate him; he must be allowed to rule over us. He must be a personal Saviour to us, known and loved - or he cannot be anything at all. We must honour him as he really is; not think that we can use him for our own ends.

We should not be fooled - things like we read in this passage do not only belong to exorcists in the ancient world. Their spirit is alive and at work today. Many church-goers treat Jesus as if he were a mere idea, to be used and manipulated as we please. Many religious folk think that they just need a little of the impersonal influence of Christian things, to help them. A little Bible reading, a little praying, a few pious thoughts, and they think that some magic influence ought to spread over their whole lives. A little bit of superstition, and if God does not bless them they take offence and think he is giving them short change! But Christ cannot be treated this way. He is the Lord of the universe, and must be followed on his own terms. He demands that we submit everything to him, and follow him as our master who is alive at God's right hand. How much of your religion is Christ? Do we know what it is to follow him in a personal way? These are great questions, and vital.

There was a clear testimony too here against the unbelieving Jews. The evil spirits could not recognise them as servants of God. They had no power against Jesus, or against Paul; Christ and his apostle could order them around at will. But the unbelieving Jews had no such power. Even if they were the sons of a chief priest himself, they could

A second thing which these verses show us is that *there must be a separation between the godly and the ungodly*. Paul did not remain in the synagogue at Ephesus forever. It seems that in Ephesus, as in Corinth, there were no violent attacks made against him. His Lord was again protecting him. But still he withdrew from the synagogue and refused to teach there any more. The reason he did that is made quite clear to us. It was because they were, by and large, hardened and unbelieving. They spoke evil of the Christian faith in public. They knew what Paul's teaching was, they rejected it, and they openly fought against it. At this point, Paul knew that his time in the synagogue had come to an end; it was time to separate from them. This was an important act, and not one that had no meaning. It is an act which every Christian must make when the circumstances arise. When the gospel's teaching is understood but opposed, a public act must be made. We must withdraw from those who do so, and make clear that we are not with them. This is what the apostle did.

There are many supposed churches today where the gospel is not taught. The evangelical faith is understood, but not endorsed. They are in a similar position to the synagogues; they name the name of God, but reject his truth. When Christians are faced with this, the Biblical response is clear. We must go elsewhere. Those who spread teaching which contradicts the Christian faith but claim to be doing it in the name of our God must be noted, and avoided (Romans 16:17). There will come a time when God will make a great and final separation (Matthew 25:31-46). He will finally separate the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the chaff. By separating now, we give a testimony that this is so. We show people what God himself will one day do. In the name of love many people reject this teaching, and say separation is wrong. But such love is not the love of God. Paul's action was endorsed by God, and led to blessing for the truth. Paul was able to teach and preach openly for a further two years. The gospel was spread throughout the whole province by him. "Jews and Greeks" heard about the Lord Jesus, and understood that there was a vital choice to be made, whether they were for or against him.

Acts 18:11-20

11 Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, 12 so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them. 13 Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." 14 Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so. 15 And the evil spirit answered and said, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" 16 Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. 18 And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. 19 Also, many of those who had practised magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totalled fifty thousands pieces of silver. 20 So the word of the Lord

them.

We must learn from the great winner of souls. The Lord Jesus was never harsh, nor failed to deal with people where they were. Every word he spoke was a "word in season". In the gospels, we see example after example of his godly wisdom - let us learn from him!

These words show us secondly *the great responsibility of those who hear the gospel*. When Silas and Timothy returned from Macedonia, Paul preached with greater liberty. It is likely that they brought money with them (Philippians 4:15, 2 Corinthians 11:9) which gave him more time for his gospel work. He testified even more boldly, that Jesus was truly the Christ. But this testimony did not go on for ever; there came a day when it was brought to an end. The Jews "opposed him and blasphemed" (verse 6). When they did so, he made clear to them that his work with them was over. He showed his garments, as a testimony that he was separating himself from them - that they were rejected by God. He told them that their blood would be upon their own heads - that he was clean. In other words, he said that the responsibility was all theirs. He had done his duty required of him, by lovingly persuading them of the truths about Jesus Christ. They had come to their part of the world, and faithfully shown them from history and from the Scripture. But whilst he had done many things, he could not force them to believe. What they did with the message, was their responsibility, and theirs alone.

These are awesome words if we have heard about the Lord Jesus Christ! God can no longer deal with us as he did before. Our responsibility has increased; our guilt is greater and we have added much to our sin if we do not repent. The gospel has encouraged us in it to be sure that it is true. It is the only message in the world which rightly describes the seriousness of our sin. It is the only message which tells us how God can save us with full satisfaction to his justice. The gospel alone brings glory to God, and humbles man. Every false teaching tells us that we can be good ourselves, and gives the glory to man; the gospel is unique, and so shows itself to be from God. Have we obeyed the message which God has given us? What a terrible thing to neglect such a word! God has not sent the punishment we deserve, but has instead sent his Son - even to the dreadful death of the cross. If we deserve eternal punishment for our sins as it is - how much more, if we neglect such a great salvation?

Let us see finally *some encouragements in evangelism*. The Lord knew Paul's trials and temptations. In city after city, he had been violently treated and abused. Especially when the Jews had rejected the gospel, great suffering had come Paul's way. We can well imagine that Paul would be fearful, living next door to the synagogue. Whilst the conversion of the synagogue's leader was a great encouragement, it likely annoyed the unbelievers even more. But the Lord appeared to Paul, and gave him three words of encouragement. Firstly, he told him about his presence - "I am with you". The first thing we need to know is that the Lord is near. Every step we take, every word we speak - the Saviour is near at hand. One of the main works for our faith to do is to rest upon this fact - we are never alone. Every thing done for him is seen, and we can always try something more for his sake because he is close by. Secondly, he told Pa

that he would be protected - nobody would hurt him. When the Lord allows his people to suffer, it is always for a reason. Because he is near, nothing happens by chance. The Lord's reasons are always most wise, and most holy - and he never sends us more than we can, by his grace, endure. Satan cannot touch us without his permission, and only ever when the Lord has something to good bring about by it. Otherwise, we are immortal! Thirdly, the Lord told Paul that he had chosen a great many people in Corinth to be saved. There were a good number in that city for whom he had died, and who must hear the gospel to be brought to eternal life. This guaranteed Paul's safety; because he would be the preacher who would bring them to faith. Here is a great encouragement for us too: God has work for us to do, and until it is done, we are invincible. God has a chosen people, and if the world is still spinning, it is because some still remain to be saved. The gospel's progress is in the hands of Christ, and he will not fail in the tiniest part.

We must then take heart! Despair and giving up can never be godly options. The Lord is near and our labour in him is not in vain. The Lord is protecting his people, and will not allow anything to happen to them except for good. The Lord has chosen a vast multitude for eternal life - and uses his people's witness to bring them to faith. Let us go out believing these things are so - ready and willing to witness for him.

Acts 18:12-18

12 When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat, 13 saying, "This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law." 14 And when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. 15 But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters." 16 And he drove them from the judgment seat. 17 Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. But Gallio took no notice of these things. 18 So Paul still remained a good while.

In these verses, the Bible meets with the history books of the world. Inscriptions discovered have shown that Gallio was proconsul of Achaia in AD 51. He held that position for only a very short time. These events can therefore be placed quite precisely in the world's history.

This passage firstly teaches us that the gospel can advance in surprising ways. At first, we may not know what makes of these verses. We might wonder why, given that nothing ended up happening to Paul, they have been recorded. But every word in God's book is there for a reason. These verses have an especial significance in the gospel's advance. In them, for the first time, a Roman ruler refuses to intervene and declare the church an illegal group. A man as important as a proconsul - ruler of an entire region - effectively said that Christianity was not forbidden by the state. The desire of the Jews to have it ruled unlawful came to nothing. Paul was able, with the Roman rulers'

he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the schools of Tyrannus. 10 And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.

Luke now tells us what happened when Paul went into the synagogue to preach. He promised to come back some time ago (18:21). Those Jews had been waiting a long time; now the great apostle was back. Once more we have a report about synagogue evangelism, and once more we read of a separation from the Jews. Let us see what we can learn.

These verses for one thing give us a clear statement about *what authentic preaching should be like*. Luke tells us four essential things about true Christian preaching. Firstly, of all, it must be bold. The Christian gospel is revealed truth, given by God himself through his Son. It is not something to apologise for, or to tone down, or to cut the corners off. It is a message from our maker which carries complete authority over all people, everywhere. It was not made up by men, and so cannot be revised or improved. It was given by the infinite and eternal God and does not need to be changed, but to be openly declared. Therefore, a Christian's preaching must be bold. He is the spokesman of God, and must insist on complete obedience from all his hearers. If he wishes to discuss his own opinions or pleasant thoughts he has had, he can do that somewhere else. When he stands up as a preacher of the word, he must make known only those things which are certain and true. Secondly, it must be reasonable and persuasive. Just because the preacher's message does not change from year to year does not mean that it need not be explained. The fact that it comes from God means we should take more efforts to show its reasonableness, not less! The fact that it is absolutely true implies that the preacher must seek to convince others of it, not that he can leave that work undone. The truth must be shown to be true. It makes sense, and the more its truth is shown, the more the conscience will be stirred up. When the mind testifies that it cannot refute what is said, the hearer is left with no excuse. He must either be driven to Christ, or driven to fury and anger; that is what happened with Paul. Thirdly, it must focus on "the things of the kingdom of God". It must speak about the Lord Jesus, his sufferings and death and universal rule. It must tell about the work of God in history through his Son, and the new order that has been brought in by him. It must not be about politics, or our personal opinions. The point of preaching is not just to fill the time, or to pass on whatever is interesting or nice. It has a specific purpose: to advance God's kingdom by declaring the truths about Jesus Christ. Anything else is not preaching at all. Fourthly, it must insist upon a response. Paul looked for his hearers to *believe*. His words were all directed to calling the Jews to action. He preached truth not only to give them knowledge. He preached persuasively, not only because he wanted them to agree. He spoke about the kingdom of God, so that they might be drawn into it. He called for a decision; he insisted upon a response. Anything less than this is not Christian preaching; it is a mere lecture. We may as well read a book! But in preaching, God deals personally with us - and personally calls us to respond. In preaching, God is speaking, and commanding us to obey. Preaching cannot leave us in the same place where we were before; it will either draw us nearer to God, or further away. It will either give us more grace, or increase our condemnation.

to speak the truth so that the reality might be seen. It is not to confuse the issue and assure them that they are saved, though living in much darkness. It is to shine the light.

Secondly, these verses show us that *every disciple must be baptised*. I hope I will be understood here. The dying thief went to glory, and was never baptised (Luke 23:43), and many have since. But in the general case, baptism is the response which the Lord demands of every believer. This has been shown us again and again throughout Acts. When Peter preached at Pentecost, he commanded the crowd to repent and be baptised (2:38, 41). When Philip preached to the Samaritans, they were baptised (8:12). When the eunuch believed, he was baptised right away (8:36). Immediately when converted Saul met his first Christian, he was baptised (9:18). When the Gentiles were first converted, Peter commanded that they must be baptised (10:48). And here we have the same thing - Paul preached Jesus Christ, and his hearers, believing, were baptised. Baptism is the first act of obedience. By it, we are received and recognised as disciples of the Lord, and confess that we have died and risen with him. Many believers today treat baptism as an option, for later years. The apostles never taught this, and it is not the will of Christ.

Thirdly, we are shown that the Christian church has been given the Holy Spirit. This was the great question which Paul asked of the disciples. The fact that they did not know of the Spirit's coming to the church, was the proof that they still had some way to go. It was because of this absence, that Paul preached Jesus to them, baptised them, and laid hands on them.

Anyone who does not have the Holy Spirit, is not a Christian and does not belong to the church. If any man does not have the Spirit, he does not belong to Christ (Romans 8:9). This does not mean that every believer must speak in tongues or prophecy (1 Corinthians 12:29-30). The gifts were not the essence of the Spirit's presence. They were the signs that a new advance had been made by the gospel in the apostles' hands. This is only the fourth time that the miraculous gifts are mentioned in Acts. They were given when the church was born amongst Jews (Acts 2). They appeared again when the gospel advanced to Samaria (Acts 8:18). The Gentiles spoke with tongues the first time the gospel came to them (10:45-46). And now here, when the gospel reached the far-flung disciples of John the Baptist, it happened again. Each time, it was a sign. A new stage in the gospel's advance had happened. It was not something that happened every time, but only on very special occasions. But it did symbolise something real. The Spirit of God is given to the church, and is its essential mark. Where the church is not holy, does not love the truth, and does not honour Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit has not been at work. What is left is not Christian, but an empty shell. Jesus is not present on the earth today, but has sent his Spirit. Where that Spirit is not, Jesus is not either.

Acts 19:8-10

8 And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. 9 But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the way before the multitude,

approval, to carry on preaching in Corinth. The church could meet openly and publicly without trouble from the law. Luke had a special purpose in writing these words. As the gospel moved closer to Rome, he was showing that Christianity was not the thing which its enemies said. It was not the cause of all the riots and disturbances which had arisen around it. These were all the fault of envious Jews, or Gentiles who were breaking the empire's laws. Christ's people were a law-abiding and quiet people, who were no threat to peace.

This result was certainly not what the Jews had in mind. Once again, their desire was to stir up trouble for the church. It is not completely clear what their accusation was about. They might have been saying that Christianity was against the law of Moses, and therefore should not have the toleration which the Romans gave to the Jewish faith. Or they might have been saying that the gospel was against the law of Caesar, because he had said that there was another king, Jesus Christ (Acts 17:7). But either way, their allegations were false. Jesus is a king, but not one whose kingdom is like those of this world. The gospel is not against the law of Moses, but completes what the Old Testament began. Whichever way was meant, the Jews hoped to stir up trouble for the church's believers. They hoped to turn the Romans against Paul and the church, and to stop the gospel's advance. But in doing so, they actually gave it a great boost. A Roman leader, now, in public, refused to have anything to do with such things. He declared that the question was not one into which he even needed to look. It was not a question of public order, evil or open crime (verse 14). He saw nothing in Paul that threatened good order and peace. And so he said he should be left alone. The Jews intended it for evil - but God turned it for good. God is well able to do these things. He is completely in control. The only weapon that can be used against him, only for him. It is certainly true that the gospel has many enemies today, just as then. If they could, they would have it removed from the face of the earth, and clamped down on wherever it appeared. But we should not be afraid because of this: God reigns and will not only stop their evil desires from taking place, but use them for good.

Let us see secondly in these verses that Paul was ready to give an account of his faith. When the accusation was made, he was "about to open his mouth", to answer it. This is the first time we read about him doing so; at Philippi, he was not given the chance. Later on, he will indeed speak about Christ to great and powerful men. But whether he got the opportunity or not, he was always ready to speak on his master's side. We may not get many opportunities to speak for Jesus; or we may get them every day. But whichever way, we should be ready to give a defence of why we trust in God. The Christian faith is not just a "leap in the dark". There are real reasons why it makes sense to believe. The truth is on our side; it is unbelievers who need to know that they have no excuse. God has made the world, and made our minds, and made it an orderly place. As such, we should expect that God's gospel should make sense. Unbelievers, on the other hand, have no good explanation for any of these things. They assume that their minds are thinking reasonable thoughts - whilst believing that those minds are the result of evolution and other cosmic accidents. They assume that logic, and rationality exist, but where they come from, they do not know. They say that this is right and that is wrong - but cannot explain why right and wrong even exist.

God's truth makes sense. The coming of Jesus was written about, in great detail, by the prophets who came for thousands of years before. There is an empty tomb, and the church has been growing in all nations just like Jesus and the prophets said it would. The believer stands on solid ground, and should be willing to say why he thinks so.

Thirdly we see that the evil planned by ungodly people often ends up coming down on their own heads. The Jews desired for the gospel to be declared illegal, and Paul to be publicly condemned. What instead happened, is that they were publicly condemned as troublemakers, and driven away from the public courts as an interference to Gallio's real work. Then we read that Sosthenes, the ruler of the Jewish synagogue, was openly beaten for what had happened. We suppose that he had become the ruler after Crispus had been converted (verse 8). We might guess that he was chosen because he was opposed to the gospel; likely he was fully behind the attempt to persecute Paul. But he ended up being publicly humiliated and beaten for it. No doubt that beating was illegal; but nobody could say it was not deserved. He wanted to see Paul hurt, without any just cause. He ended up receiving just that treatment himself. He wanted to hurt the church; instead, he ended up being hurt himself.

History is full of examples of this. The church is the apple of God's eye; whoever touches it, shall be troubled by God (Zechariah 2:8-9). The church does not need to take its own revenge, because it has an avenger who is mighty. We should not lose heart when we see the church being attacked by the ungodly. God sees it, and he will remember. We may trust him to settle the accounts at last.

Acts 18:18-23

18 So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow. 19 And he came to Ephesus, and left them there; but he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. 20 When they asked him to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent, 21 but took leave of them, saying, "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing." And he sailed from Ephesus. 22 And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch. 23 After he had spent some time there, he departed and went over the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples.

These verses record the end of the second missionary journey. It had been about four years since Paul had set off from Antioch. He had made new friends, travelled across land and sea, been beaten, been imprisoned, and probably ship-wrecked too (2 Corinthians 11:25). He had preached in Galatia, Phrygia, Macedonia and Achaia. He had declared the gospel to Jew and Gentile, in the synagogue and in the Areopagus. He had evangelised women at the riverside, prison guards at midnight and philosophers at Athens. Now Luke tells us how Paul returned to Antioch - and set off once again!

all.

We are now reading about Paul's third missionary journey. He began by visiting the churches in Galatia and Phrygia, one by one (verse 23). Now, he kept his promise (verse 21) by coming back to Ephesus to preach the word more fully there. This is the final missionary journey before Paul was taken as a prisoner to Rome. These verses raise many difficult questions; it is hard to say for sure what some of the expressions mean. But let us learn what we can, believing that God has a message for us in them.

One thing these verses show us clearly is that *a great deal of knowledge and ignorance can be found mixed up in the same people*. When Paul came to Ephesus he was planning to preach to the Jews in the synagogue. But before that happened, he made a discovery - of "some disciples" (verse 1). Paul found something strange about these "disciples", which led him to ask them a question about whether they had received the Holy Spirit. Just what he found strange, we do not know. The disciples' reply is also not totally clear; John the Baptist had himself taught about the Spirit - they ignorant of this (Luke 3:16), or had they simply not heard that the Spirit was now given? They had been baptised by John, which expressed their repentance over their sin, and desire for the Messiah who was to come. But they yet lacked a great deal, and Paul needed to tell them that John was pointing forward to Jesus - that Jesus from Nazareth was the Christ. Paul spoke to them about Christian baptism too, and what it meant. He explained more fully, and they obeyed the word he preached and were baptised.

No doubt there are many things in here which are unique to the times in which Paul lived. There were little pockets of Old Testament believers who had not yet received the good news about Jesus. They hoped for a Messiah, but yet lacked the full truth about him. There were those who had received light through John the Baptist such as Apollos and these disciples, but were still missing some. There were no newspapers those days, and the distances involved were quite large. Groups which had little access to the gospel truth, yet had responded well to what they did have would be common enough.

Nevertheless, Paul shows us how to deal with those whose knowledge is greatly lacking. They are not to be shunned, or despised. We should not look down on those who have not yet come as far as we have. We must remember that everything we have someone once brought for the first time to us! We should treat them graciously. But neither can we say that remaining in ignorance will do. Paul did not treat them as already Christians, but preached the fullness of truth to them. In that way, where their hearts really were became clear. They were indeed alive to God, and received the word with all readiness. We can learn from this too; when a seeker receives clearer light and rejects it, their seeking is not true. There might be many Christians in false churches today, where the gospel is not really taught. There may be many who truly cling to Christ as their only Saviour, despite having been told many untruths. But when the fullness of truth comes to them, they cannot remain where they were. The test of whether they are really Christians will be whether they move on. Our task is, like Paul's,

gone - back to Jerusalem and Antioch. Aquila, it seems, did not have a gift to speak in public. There was nobody to publicly evangelise the Jews at Ephesus, and the believers at Corinth needed someone to more firmly establish them. But God had raised someone up - Apollos. In the absence of strong Christian leaders, God brought through another man.

It has been well said - "the graveyards are full of irreplaceable men". Nobody is irreplaceable, because the God who raised them up can raise up another one too - and he does. The advance of the gospel is in his hands. The Lord Jesus told his disciples to pray that more workers might be sent out into the harvest fields (Matthew 9:36-38) - because it is a prayer which God intends to answer. The harvest field is very large, and the workers in it are very few - but we have a promise which we must rely upon, and bring to the throne of grace. Many churches in our country today lack pastors. There seem to be fewer young men coming forward for the gospel ministry. We fear for what will happen to our land in future days. But let us rely upon God! He raised up Apollos for Ephesus and Corinth; he can do so for us today.

Finally, let us notice that *the early churches had brotherly relationships*. When Apollos wanted to travel over the Aegean sea to Achaia, he did not go as an individual. He went with the recommendation of the Ephesian church, who wrote on his behalf.

There is nothing here of an organisation or a hierarchy. There was certainly no Pope in the church who sorted out these things. Paul set up no structures or offices to rule above local churches. But what did happen is that one group of brothers in the Lord wrote to another and exhorted them (verse 27). They did not treat each other as if they were completely independent. They respected each other, and each was willing to see the other helped.

It would be good for our churches if we could have more of this spirit. We are all one family, and shall be together for eternity. We should behave on earth as if it were so! Big churches can help smaller ones; smaller ones can help bigger ones too. Let us see that our prayers and our desires are not exhausted by what goes on in our own corner. We have brethren to the ends of the world.

Acts 19:1-7

1 And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples, 2 he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" So they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." 3 And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptised?" So they said, "Into John's baptism." 4 Then Paul said, "John indeed baptised with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." 5 When they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. 7 Now the men were about twelve in

It is not completely certain just what Paul was doing. It seems very likely that he had taken a Nazarite vow, described in Numbers 6. He had separated himself for a time, taken a vow. During all that time, his hair had not been cut at all. When the time came to an end, it was cut, and then Numbers 6 said that it should be burnt in the temple at Jerusalem. We do not know exactly why Paul took this vow - maybe to demonstrate that he was a Jew who had not been unfaithful at all to the law. Maybe he needed to refute the Jews who said that Christianity was opposed to the historic faith. But whatever it was, Paul obviously felt it was important enough to need such steps.

The first lesson for us from these words is that *we ought to take every opportunity to spread the gospel*. Paul had a long journey to make, which would take many months and a lot of difficulty. But when he came to Ephesus, he did not immediately hurry to get it done. There was a synagogue there, and he had the opportunity to preach. He had been prevented from preaching in Asia before (Acts 16:6) - but now he had the chance. He did not have time to stay and do much - but did not let that stop him from doing anything at all. He went in and "reasoned with the Jews", as he did elsewhere.

There may be many times when we cannot do very much. At such times, we are tempted to do nothing at all. We look at the great difficulty - and the huge amount of labour needed. We see a mountain to be climbed, and wonder what the point would be in starting at all. But this is not the way of faith. Faith says, "I will do what I can now and let God take care of the rest". God does not require us to do miracles; but he does require us to be faithful in what we do have. It is easy to despair when we see the state of the church in our land. But God is well able to turn it all around. We may think that the gospel will never make progress in our school, our office or our street. But if we have faith in God, mountains can be moved.

Let us secondly notice the words which Paul used when he spoke about his desire to come back to Ephesus again. The Jews there were open-minded at that time, and desired to hear more so that they might consider what he was saying. Paul was not afraid to remain to tell them more - but did say that he planned to come back, "God willing". Paul shows us that *we must submit all of our future plans to the will of God*. The words "God willing" maybe have become familiar to us now; we might use them all the time without thinking anything of them. But there is nothing good about merely using words. We must have the reality of what they mean. We must realise and understand that whilst we make our plans, there is a God in heaven who decides the outcome of events. We might set out in one direction - but our maker will determine where we end up.

The people of this world behave as if there were no God. They make their plans, with no reference to him. And when their plans go wrong, they turn to anger or despair because they have been thwarted. But God's people must be different; we must recognise that God is wiser than us, and any "mishap" is really for the better. We must be ready for God to intervene, and put an end to our cherished desires. We must be ready to say "it is the Lord - let him do what is right in his own eyes".

Thirdly, let us see *the great importance of believers being strengthened in the faith*. Paul was the most eager evangelist the world had ever known. The fate of the lost Jews grieved him deeply, all the time (Romans 9:1-3). His love for the lost Gentiles drove him to the ends of the world. He had had to leave Ephesus for a time, and was eager to return there. But there was something so important, that he allowed it to delay his return. He went back again to the churches in Phrygia and Galatia, "strengthening the disciples" who had been converted before. He went over "in order" - carefully making sure he did not miss out a single place. All those who had believed needed to be visited again, and encouraged.

The Lord Jesus is not looking for followers who are followers in name alone. He did not shed his blood merely so that his name should be repeated. He suffered and died for a people who would bring real glory to that name. He endured the cross and the grave so that his sheep might really be released from sin in all of its ungodly ways. He died for them, so that they might live for him. And to do this is not an easy work; it is not complete with just a few weeks of teaching. It is the work of a lifetime, and requires continuing effort and care. Paul knew all of this very well. He had already visited the churches in those parts before. He had written to the Galatians about some of the serious errors which they had begun to believe. Paul understood that without continuing care and instruction, those who profess the faith will not become mature and may fall away completely.

Churches today often have a great emphasis on spreading the gospel. This is good; the Lord told us to preach to all the nations. But we would do well to pay more attention to discipleship too. The Lord said that the nations must be *discipled*, not just evangelised. Let us ask the question of our own souls. Are we content with the measure of grace we have already received? We ought to desire more. We have more than we can ever imagine to learn. We need to grow or we will die. Are we standing still? Then we are in danger - we are actually going backwards. Christianity is to pursue Jesus Christ - nothing else will do. Let us make sure that we are growing in the faith, and so bring glory to God.

Acts 18:24-28

24 Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. 25 This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in Spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. 26 So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. 27 And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; 28 for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.

This passage is a significant one; in it, we are not reading about Paul any more! He was

the great apostle to the Gentiles - but now God uses someone else. We meet Apollos who is named seven times in 1 Corinthians, and then once in Titus. He became a great companion and helper of Paul.

This passage firstly teaches us that *Christian gifts and Christian maturity are not the same thing at all*. Apollos was a very gifted man. We are told that he was "eloquent" and "mighty in the Scriptures" too. He could speak, and knew a great deal of the Old Testament's true meaning. He was not a man-pleaser, but preached boldly, publicly and with vigour. He had learnt from the teaching of John the Baptist, very probably passed on via others. He had an accurate knowledge of the things of the Lord, and taught them well. But for all this, there was something missing from his teaching. He "knew only the baptism of John" - i.e. that of repentance in preparation for the coming Christ. He probably knew and preached that Jesus of Nazareth was that Christ; but seems never to have encountered the church and his message was missing something. At the least, he did not know about the command to preach to all the nations, and to baptise them in Jesus' name. Somehow, he seems to have not heard about the great event of Pentecost. His message was missing some important things, and he needed further instruction. God's kindness, Aquila and Priscilla were at Ephesus, and taught him what he still needed to know. Then, Apollos became a mighty help to the Christian church.

We live in a time of very little discernment. The world tends to look at the outward appearance of a thing, and is very slow to learn anything more. This spirit has come into the churches too, with horrible results. We have adopted the ways of the age; we ask what a thing looks like, instead of what it is. A man is praised as a great Christian because of the great gifts and talents which he displays. But gifts are not the same as grace. Gifts are exactly what they are called - gifts, freely given, by God. They are not the same as maturity, which is the work of time and effort.

We can easily fool ourselves about these things. We can easily satisfy ourselves that we are doing well, because we have gifts that we can use for the Lord. But gifts do not prove the reality or depth of our spiritual life. Judas was a man who preached and performed miracles - but finished in the darkest depths of hell. He had gifts and the power of God's Spirit worked in him - but he had no grace, and the work was not done in him. Now Apollos was already a man who had made progress in grace; but he still had some way to go. Aquila and Priscilla did not praise him, and urge him to continue preaching in the synagogues. He was not ready to do that - his message was very much incomplete. But neither did they despair, and move on as if nothing could be done. They saw the gifts that God had given - and sought to help him that they might be expressed in the right and proper way. They taught him the fullness of Christ's word that he might teach that instead. If we have gifts, they are not given to us to show off with. Neither are they useless things to ignore. They are given to be developed, harnessed and then used so that they might bring glory to Christ. What is your gift? Are you developing it? Are you seeking to harness it? One day the master will require an account!

Let us see secondly that *God raises up workers for the gospel work*. Paul was now