

Setting the scene

As I read this chapter and considered the lives of the people featured in it, I was struck that there was so much travel at this period, It was around the late 40s and early 50s A.D. The Roman Empire had no doubt enabled much more travel as trade increased and Rome needed to keep control of her vast empire.

Map

I have tried to get the geography and timings of what follows correct but, if not, the substance of my talk isn't really affected. When I speak of the church in a certain place, I mean the local group of believers in Jesus; they did not have dedicated buildings to meet in at that time.

Last week you looked at v 1 – 17 so just to recap:

Paul was on his second missionary journey and had arrived in Corinth in Greece. Aquila, who was a native of Pontus on the Black Sea Coast in the North of what is now Turkey (map), and his wife Priscilla, had recently arrived in Corinth (map) and working as tentmakers. That was Paul's trade, too, so he stayed with them. They had been living in Rome, but Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews and Aquila and Priscilla moved to Corinth. At some point Aquila and Priscilla heard the Good News about Jesus and accepted Him as the Son of God and their Messiah – it seems likely that this was from Paul.

As usual, Paul tried to persuade the Jews and proselyte gentiles in the synagogue in Corinth, each week, but eventually the Jews became hostile, and Paul decided to concentrate on reaching the gentiles for Christ.

Moving on

Despite the opposition and troubles, many people did believe in Jesus and Paul stayed in Corinth for at least eighteen months, before moving on and taking Aquilla and Priscilla with him.

Before setting sail from the port of Cenchrea (map), Paul had his hair cut off because he had taken a vow. It's possible this was a Nazirite vow (like Samson) of separating himself to the Lord and seeking His blessing for the work. In Numbers 6 we find that this vow could be taken by men or women who would separate themselves to the Lord by not eating *or drinking* any fruit of the vine, avoiding all contact with corpses and letting their hair grow. When the period of the vow was complete, they would bring sacrificial offerings to the Lord and have their hair cut.

It's interesting that at this time Jewish believers in Jesus, like Paul, were still worshipping in the synagogues and observing the Law, though not as a means of salvation – they recognised that they were saved by grace through faith in Jesus, as were the Gentile believers. The Council of Jerusalem, in AD 48, 49 had come to the agreement that Gentile believers in Jesus would not be required to be circumcised, but should abstain from sexual immorality, from

food offered to idols, from meat with the blood still in it. These last prohibitions regarding food seem to be so as not to give offence to the Jewish converts in the same new churches as the gentile converts.

Later, in his letter to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 8 v 1f and 10 v 25 f) Paul tells the believers not to worry too much about where the meat has come from. For those who were slaves, who would be given the leftovers from the owners' meals, it is probable that the only food they got had been offered to idols before the boss ate, so Paul's teaching would be very welcome. However, they should be aware that another believer (or Jewish friend) might be offended by their freedom, in which case it would be better to abstain from eating that food for the sake of the other's conscience.

For us, the teaching about consideration of the weaker brother, whose conscience would be troubled by our behaviour, is something we should remember. For example, I might not think it wrong to drink some wine with my meal, but if I were sharing a meal with someone who felt strongly that Christians shouldn't take alcohol, my freedom would offend. And, supposing God had indicated to that person that they should be TT because they had an addictive personality and alcohol became a problem for them because they copied me, then I would be guilty of causing them to stumble in their walk with God.

Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus

Aquila and Priscilla and Paul sailed across the Aegean Sea and arrived in Ephesus, that great city on the West coast of what is now Turkey. (Map) There they no doubt set up their tent-making business and Paul reasoned in the synagogue, preaching about Jesus.

In verse 20 it's not clear whether the people who asked Paul to stay on were the Jews in the synagogue, or new converts, or Priscilla and Aquila. I think it's most likely to be Aquila and Priscilla and new converts. However, Paul declined, and V 21 NKJ includes some explanatory words, which are omitted in NIV and ESB:

V21 "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing."

I wonder whether Paul's eagerness to get back to Jerusalem, was so that he could make the various offerings at the Temple, in accordance with the ending of a Nazirite vow. We aren't told.

So, Paul sailed again, to continue his journey to Jerusalem via the port of Caesarea, (red line on map). P and A remained behind to nurture the new church in Ephesus.

Paul did return, as he hoped. After his visit to Jerusalem, he set off on his third missionary journey (orange line on map) and on reaching Ephesus, he stayed for about three years, during which time he wrote letters to the church in Corinth, sending greetings from A and P *and the church that is in their house*. 1 Cor. 16 v 19

Jumping ahead possibly only a few months, when Paul wrote to the church in Rome from Corinth, he sent greetings to A and P, who, it seems, had moved back to Rome.

Romans 16 v3, 4: “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life”

Was that during the troubles in Corinth or in Ephesus a few years earlier?

“to whom I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.”

They had obviously done a lot to nurture the Gentile believers in other places as well as Ephesus and Corinth.

Paul continued: “Greet the church that is in their house.”

They were back in Rome and can’t have been there very long, if my timings are correct, and already there is a church meeting in their house!

What do we learn about this couple?

Firstly, they were saved and were zealous for the Lord. They had a big heart for others, especially new believers. They were courageous and trusted God, even in risking their lives for Paul. They were hospitable and gave of their time and personal space to further the work of God. It can’t always have been easy.

Apollos

V24 Meanwhileie while Paul was travelling round on his third missionary journey slowly heading back to Ephesus,

... there was a new arrival in Ephesus: Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria. (Map)

Alexandria is in North Africa, in Egypt. It was a big Mediterranean port, founded by Alexander the Great and then, after the Greeks, became part of the Roman Empire with trading connections, of course, to Rome. Apparently, grain would be imported to Egypt and sand exported back to Rome as ballast in the ships. Why would they want sand in Rome? ... For the arenas! Alexandria was a great centre of learning in those days with a famous and extensive library which, significantly, contained the Old Testament Scriptures.

Apollos was a Jewish believer in Jesus. What a wonderful reputation he had! V 24, 25 He was eloquent, learned, grounded in the scriptures (OT of course). He was fervent in spirit and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus. He taught boldly in the synagogue, but Aquila and Priscilla spotted a problem. He was accurate in his teaching about Jesus but hadn’t got the full story. As it’s now about 50 years after the resurrection, it seems unlikely that he had first-hand knowledge of the Lord’s time on earth, but that whoever introduced him to the Lord didn’t have the full story. As he had been baptised for repentance – John’s baptism, but not baptised in the name of Jesus, it’s probable that he didn’t know about the events of Pentecost and was perhaps even ignorant of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Notice how Aquila and Priscilla dealt with it. They didn’t challenge him publicly but took him aside privately and filled in the gaps in his knowledge. Notice too, how this highly educated and sophisticated, very intelligent and knowledgeable man humbly received the corrective teaching of a couple of tentmakers.

They encouraged him when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the province where Corinth is situated (map), and the Christians in Ephesus sent him with a letter of introduction.

NKJ v27b 'When he arrived (in Achaia) he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.'

The Jews were teaching that the whole teaching of the Torah must be obeyed – the whole burden of trying to earn salvation through works and the sacrificial offerings which relieved some of the burden of guilt. Those who had accepted the Truth of Jesus and been forgiven and given new life by His atoning death on the cross – the ultimate and complete sacrifice for sin – were probably still attending synagogue worship and must have found they were pressurised back into the former beliefs and practice. Just as the church Paul wrote to in Galatia had been swayed by visiting teachers who had persuaded them to accept a false gospel involving works again:

Paul wrote (Gal 3 v 1 – 3): 'O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? '

And Paul goes on, refuting the wrong teaching they had taken on board.

This is what Apollos was doing in Achaia province and it was a great blessing to the believers there.

Not everyone has the gift that Paul and Apollos had to be able to dispute and to convince people like that. And even if many of the Jews rejected the arguments, it was a great encouragement to the believers to know that the true gospel holds water and fulfils the Old Testament teaching and prophecies.

You will be seeing next week what happened when Paul got back to Ephesus and found Apollos there, but there are a couple more things we can learn about him from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, which he wrote towards the end of this next three-year stint in Ephesus.

1 Cor. 1 v11; 3 v 4 'My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul", another, "I follow Apollos", another, "I follow Cephas (Peter) still another, "I follow Christ."

They had split into parties according to who their favourite teacher was, or perhaps who it was who had led them to the Lord. It even sounds as if the ones who said 'I follow Christ' were being a bit proud – a bit of spiritual one-up-man-ship perhaps?

In chapter 3, Paul berates them for their worldliness in this matter:

'What, after all is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.'

Different tasks

This is the lesson I want us to take from our consideration of Aquila, Priscilla and Apollos:

‘The Lord has assigned each to his and her task’.

Aquilla and Priscilla, a married couple who worked together, encouraging those younger in the faith to grow and flourish. They were hard-working with a business and busy among the believers. They were courageous, risking their lives when Paul was in danger. They were open-hearted and, wherever they settled, it seems they opened their homes to the believers to meet, and probably led the fledgling churches. They were sound in their understanding of Christ’s teaching and the gospel, and were gentle and tactful to fill in the gaps in Apollos’s knowledge.

Apollos was apparently single. He was very intelligent and well-educated. He was knowledgeable in the scriptures and fervent in his love and service for the Lord. He was eloquent and bold to speak out to those who opposed the gospel and was able to argue and refute opposition arguments.

He was popular and inspired admiration in the church in Corinth. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian believers, he writes that he urged Apollos to accompany the other brothers who were travelling to Corinth, but Apollos was unwilling to do that at that time. I wonder if it was because of the divisions that had sprung up and he was wary of causing trouble again. Paul suggests that he will go when the opportunity arises again.

A married couple and a single man with different gifts and abilities, working in the early church as God led them.

We are all different, with differing strengths and abilities, but God has work for each of us. In my experience, there have been different areas of work for the Lord at various times through my life. Perhaps it is that one aspect has been more to the fore at a certain time.

It is important for us to recognise that ‘We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for *us* to do.’ (Eph. 2 v 10).

The NKJ has: “to *walk in* the good works He has prepared in advance for us”.

I like that image – walking through our lives with the Lord Jesus as He points out a work for us here and there to do to the best of our ability and in faith.

It is pointless and damaging to look at the ministry and gifts and talents of other believers and berate ourselves because we are not like them or, worse, to feel superior to them.

We are the body of Christ, designed to work together, fitting together with our different strengths and gifts and recognising that God’s power is made perfect in our weakness, so that the glory goes to Him alone.

I'll close with Paul's words to the church at Ephesus (map) (4 v 1 - 7)

'I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it ...

And I paraphrase ...

Each with different gifts and tasks ... so that we will grow up into Christ, building one another up in love, as we each play our part. Amen