

Knowing Better

Acts 18:18-28

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If you've had the experience of raising children, you know they go through lots of stages, many of which are challenging. We often talk about the "terrible twos", though in my experience, three was usually worse. We deal with the preteen years, the teen years, and the post-high school years. Then I know there are also the adult years, but I haven't parented a child through that stage yet. A stage that people don't talk much about, however, is the "I know" years. It's the stage where no matter what you say, they will tell you, "I know!" and roll their eyes at you. My children all went through this stage (and sometimes seem to revert to it). It's a frustrating stage because they obviously don't know these things, and it's like trying to talk to a brick wall. I always looked forward to the day when I might actually be able to teach my kids something again.

You may have experienced the same thing with adults too. Sometimes we come across people who are convinced they have all the answers and aren't willing to hear any other point of view. They aren't interested in hearing from anyone else, because they are so self-assured that they are certain no one else could possibly think of something they hadn't. Most of us have probably had that encounter. If you haven't, maybe you should consider that you're that person to others! In truth, we all sometimes fall into that category, though we know we shouldn't.

Our passage today will give us an example of someone who could have easily fallen prey to such an attitude. But because he didn't, God was able to use him mightily, and he experienced great blessing at the hands of God and others. There are lessons for us to learn from every person in this account, so we should pay careful attention to it.

Leaving Corinth

Last week we saw Paul in Corinth. He had faced some great hardships while there and I believe he had grown discouraged because of those hardships. Nonetheless, the Lord provided ample reason for Paul to lift his spirits and continue serving faithfully. The Lord introduced him to Priscilla and Aquila and enabled him to stay in the city for a year and a half, carrying out ministry the entire time. Today we pick up at the end of that time, as Paul decided to return home, ending his second missionary journey.

¹⁸ Paul stayed in Corinth for some time after that, then said good-bye to the brothers and sisters and went to nearby Cenchrea. There he shaved his head according to Jewish custom, marking the end of a vow. Then he set sail for Syria, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him.

¹⁹ They stopped first at the port of Ephesus, where Paul left the others behind. While he was there, he went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews. ²⁰ They asked him to stay longer, but he declined. ²¹ As he left, however, he said, "I will come back later, God willing." Then he set sail from Ephesus. (Acts 18:18-21, NLT)

Paul decided to leave Corinth and headed to the nearby port city of Cenchrea. Luke tells us that while he was there, he shaved his head to mark the end of a vow. This is a foreign concept to us, but it was not an unusual occurrence for first century Jews. We don't know exactly what Paul's vow was, but it was most likely a Nazirite vow of some sort. Nazirite vows were spelled out in Numbers 6, but the basic idea was that you could take a vow to the Lord as a way of showing your devotion to Him. During that time, you would not touch the fruit of the vine (which extended beyond just alcohol to all sorts of grape products), and you would also not cut your hair. At the conclusion of this vow, however, you would cut your hair and offer it as a sacrifice to the Lord. Most people assume this is what Paul was doing at Cenchrea. Regardless of the exact nature of the vow, he was taking time to worship the Lord and express his gratitude for all God had done in him and through him.

After that, he set sail for Syria, which was the region where Antioch (his home base) was located. Their first stop on the trip was the town of Ephesus, which was a place he had not been able to visit before. If you recall, at the beginning of his journey, Paul and his companions had tried to visit the towns in the province of Asia, but the Holy Spirit had prevented them from doing so. Now, Paul was finally permitted to go to Ephesus.

It does not appear that Paul took Silas and Timothy with him, but he did ask Priscilla and Aquila to go along with him as he went to Ephesus. When he arrived, he followed his typical approach, going to the synagogue to reason with the Jews in the hopes of pointing them to Christ. But Paul did not stay long, as he possibly may have only had a short time in Ephesus before his ship departed again for home. But he told the Ephesians he would return to them again in the future, if the Lord willed. He left Priscilla and Aquila behind in the city, while he headed back toward Jerusalem.

An End and A Beginning

Luke records the next portion of Paul's travels with very few details.

²² The next stop was at the port of Caesarea. From there he went up and visited the church at Jerusalem and then went back to Antioch. ²³ After spending some time in Antioch, Paul went back through Galatia and Phrygia, visiting and strengthening all the believers. (Acts 18:22-23, NLT)

Paul made a significant journey to get to Caesarea, the nearest major port city to Jerusalem. He then headed up to Jerusalem to meet with the church there. Why did Paul feel so strongly that he must return to Jerusalem? We don't know, but some manuscripts suggest he wanted to return to attend the festival (presumably Passover). Paul may have had in mind that he wanted to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem and would use that as an opportunity to reach out to the Jews there and to reconnect with the church in the city.

I wonder if Paul felt that he had sharpened his skills in pointing Jews to Jesus. We know he had a great heart for the Jews, especially those in Jerusalem, and he desperately wanted them to come to know Jesus as he had. So, I wonder if he set his missionary

heart on the city of Jerusalem. We don't know that for sure, but it certainly seems plausible to me.

After spending some time in Jerusalem, Paul returned to Antioch, which was kind of his home-base. The church in Antioch had sent he and Barnabas on their initial missionary journey, and they had once again commissioned him and Silas for this second one. Most people view this return to Antioch as the end of Paul's second missionary journey, and his departure as the beginning of his third journey. I'm inclined to agree.

We can reasonably assume that Paul returned to Antioch to report to the church there on what had transpired in the intervening years. He surely told them of his hardships and also of the great victories he had experienced. He likely reported that when he was at his lowest, the Lord provided for him in ways he didn't even know he needed, and that a great work had been undertaken in Corinth of all places. The city known far and wide for its depravity had seen the gospel take hold, and a church was beginning to form even in a city like that.

The people of Antioch were surely encouraged to hear how the Lord was working through Paul. But soon Paul's heart began to burn once more, and he felt compelled to go back and continue the work he had begun. So he left Antioch, thus beginning the third missionary journey.

He started out by going through Galatia and Phrygia, places he had already been on both his first and second journeys. He understood the importance of continuing to care for and build up these churches. Paul was a church planter, but also had the heart of a pastor, longing to see his old friends and to see their growth in the Lord once more.

Paul shows us that ministry doesn't always look the same. He understood the importance of allowing the Lord to lead him. He had wanted to go to Ephesus, but the Lord revealed to him that the time wasn't right. When he finally did go to Ephesus, he knew it still wasn't time for him to devote a long time in the city, because he felt led to return to Jerusalem. And he wasn't going to Jerusalem and Antioch simply for a vacation, he recognized that he had an assignment to do in each of these places. The same was true even when he left Antioch. His focus shifted from pioneering the gospel message in places it had never been to strengthening the churches he had helped to found. There's a time and a place for all sorts of different ministry. We must be open to the Lord's leading to know what we should do and when.

This is a good reminder to us that everywhere we go we are to be engaged in ministry. That's not always going to look the same, as each situation will be different. But if we're open to the Lord's leading, we'll be able to serve Him well, no matter where we are or what is going on around us.

Apollos

While Paul was traveling back to Jerusalem, Antioch, and the churches in the north, the Lord was continuing to work in Ephesus.

²⁴ Meanwhile, a Jew named Apollos, an eloquent speaker who knew the Scriptures well, had arrived in Ephesus from Alexandria in Egypt. ²⁵ He had been taught the way of the Lord, and he taught others about Jesus with an enthusiastic spirit and with accuracy. However, he knew only about John's baptism. ²⁶ When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching boldly in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately. (Acts 18:24-26, NLT)

Priscilla and Aquila had stayed behind in Ephesus after Paul left. They had become believers while working with Paul in Corinth, and were seeking to begin building a church in Ephesus. While they were there, they attended the synagogue, as Paul had done each week.

One Saturday, a Jewish man named Apollos came and spoke. We are told that he was an eloquent speaker from Alexandria in Egypt. Alexandria was one of the major seats of learning in the ancient world, much as Athens had once been. Alexandria had major universities and the world's most extensive library, with writings from all over the world at that time. It was renowned for its scholarship and education.

The fact that Apollos hailed from Alexandria and was described as an eloquent speaker who knew the scriptures well indicates that he had likely been educated in Alexandria. We might expect that he had the equivalent of a master's degree or a doctorate. Priscilla and Aquila were immediately impressed with Apollos' teaching. He seemed to know of the ministry of John the Baptist. Some have suggested that Apollos may have had the opportunity to travel to Jerusalem and study there during the time of John the Baptist's ministry but then had to return to Alexandria. This seems like a reasonable explanation to me.

Unfortunately for Apollos (and his hearers), he didn't know the whole story. He knew what John had preached, namely that the Messiah was coming and so they should repent of their sins, but he did not seem to know that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah or what He had accomplished. Priscilla and Aquila saw an opportunity to share the gospel with someone they hoped would accept it readily and could be a tremendous asset to the Kingdom.

They faced a challenge, however. Apollos was a well-educated guest lecturer. They were blue-collar workers who worked at making tents. There was no guarantee that Apollos would listen to them. He might have assumed that they would not be able to teach him anything. Priscilla and Aquila approached him wisely, however. They did not embarrass him in front of others, they didn't try to upstage him, rather, they pulled him aside and explained things more fully to him.

I like to imagine them inviting him over for dinner and talking to him in that format. Imagine the conversation. "Apollos, we're so glad you came here, as we greatly enjoyed your message. You are really a tremendous speaker! We especially enjoyed the part where you explained about the coming of the Messiah. We too heard about John's ministry and message, and we agree wholeheartedly that the time has come for us to

get right with God. Did you know that before John was killed he actually pointed out that the Messiah had come? His name was Jesus, and he performed all manner of miracles—things no one had ever seen before. The greatest, however, was rising from the dead three days after being killed. He then ascended into Heaven and sent the Holy Spirit to be with us so that we might serve Him fully.”

I don’t know if that’s how things actually went or not. But regardless of how their conversation went, Apollos heard them and embraced the gospel for himself.

Apollos the Missionary

Once Apollos had understood and embraced the fullness of the gospel message, he wanted to begin ministering to others, helping them to know Jesus as he did!

²⁷ Apollos had been thinking about going to Achaia, and the brothers and sisters in Ephesus encouraged him to go. They wrote to the believers in Achaia, asking them to welcome him. When he arrived there, he proved to be of great benefit to those who, by God’s grace, had believed. ²⁸ He refuted the Jews with powerful arguments in public debate. Using the Scriptures, he explained to them that Jesus was the Messiah. (Acts 18:27-28, NLT)

Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the region where Corinth was located. Priscilla and Aquila would have had connections there, so they and the other believers in Ephesus dispatched Apollos with a letter from them, vouching for his ministry and asking them to welcome him there.

Because of his great knowledge and ability to speak clearly and eloquently, he became a great benefit to the church there. He taught the believers and served as a powerful witness to the Jews of the region. The Jews found themselves unable to argue against what Apollos was teaching, and many came to believe.

We know that Apollos carried out a significant ministry in Corinth because of what we read about him in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Apparently Apollos had become a highly respected teacher amongst the Corinthians, and (through no fault of his own) people had begun dividing into factions, with some deciding they were followers of Paul and others that they were followers of Apollos. Paul addressed the foolishness of this practice, pointing out that neither he nor Apollos was anything, but that God had chosen to work through them both! Christians should not focus on a particular human teacher but on the Lord who saved them!

We don’t know if Paul and Apollos had even met at the time he wrote these words, but Paul must have heard about Apollos’ reputation. He knew he was preaching and teaching from the scriptures, and that was enough for him. He wasn’t concerned with a popularity contest, or about trying to compete with Apollos for influence. Paul’s concern was singular—to glorify God, not himself.

Conclusion

As Paul's second missionary journey came to a close, we see the mission team expanding. Not only were Silas and Timothy serving the Lord without Paul, but so were Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos. God was expanding the reach of the church and multiplying its influence. And this section can teach us several things if we will listen.

First, God can use people of all types for the Kingdom. Paul was a well-educated Pharisee. Priscilla and Aquila were blue-collar workers who loved the Lord. Apollos was a well-educated academic from Egypt. And yet, the Lord used each of them. So often I hear people who say they cannot serve the Lord because they aren't adequate. Often people say they don't know enough, or they are concerned that someone may ask them a question they can't answer. Or they worry that they don't have the same skillset that someone else has. But this passage reminds us that God can use everyone. He has given us each different skills. You can't present the gospel like me, and I can't present it like you. That's ok! It means God can use us each differently. But He will use us if we are open to it. Be attentive and open to the opportunities He gives you. Don't worry about being qualified, if the Lord opens a door for you to walk through, He'll also equip you with what you need.

Second, don't be too proud to learn from others. Sometimes as Christians we can become so self-assured that we aren't able to learn anymore. This is a common pitfall from people who attend Bible college or seminary. They believe their education has rendered them an expert, so they can't learn from others who don't have their credentials. I'm not saying that theological education is worthless. It's not. But theological education is not the only way God teaches His children! Sometimes others have insights the Lord has revealed to them through experience, or by reading a book, or hearing a sermon. Don't allow yourself to become too prideful to learn the lessons God has taught others. God may teach you through those with less education, or have been believers for a shorter time, or whose lives don't look as polished, or from children. Test everything against scripture, but be open to learning from the people around you. If you keep your pride in check, you might be surprised at who can teach you.

Finally, make sure you know the gospel in its fullness. Apollos knew facts about the Messiah but did not know Him. Once he understood who Jesus was, he embraced Him fully and never looked back. My fear is that there are many in our churches today who are like Apollos. They've got lots of information, but they do not know the risen Christ. Let me challenge you today to ask yourself who Jesus is to you. Is He merely a historical figure, or is He central to who you are and at the center of all you do? Don't simply settle for facts about Jesus, embrace Him fully and live for Him always.

Some of us never seem to grow out of the "I know" stage that drives us crazy with little children. My hope is that you and I will be humble enough to recognize that we don't know everything. We need to start the journey by knowing Jesus and then be open to wherever He leads you next.

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