

Strengthening the Body of Believers

By Dan and Brenda Cathcart

The video version is at: <https://youtu.be/32f7kp1DRiY>

The scripture reading is Acts 18:18-28

Paul spent a year and a half in the city of Corinth. While many of the Jews of the city rejected the gospel, some of the most prominent Jews in the city received Paul's message. The first of these was Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue when Paul first arrived in Corinth. His successor, Sosthenes, originally an antagonist of Paul's message and one who brought him to the Roman judgment seat, also, eventually accepted the message. Sosthenes apparently joined Paul at some point in his journeys and was with Paul when Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 1:1-2 NKJV 1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, 2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

This second journey of Paul's to spread the gospel had lasted for about three years. It was time to return to Jerusalem, rest for a while in Syrian Antioch and then check in with the other believers in Galatia and Phrygia.

Paul and his companions left Corinth and headed across the isthmus to Cenchrea, a port city six miles to the southeast of Corinth on the Aegean Sea. It would provide the shortest journey back to Paul's home in Antioch.

Acts 18:18 NKJV 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.

Aquila and Priscilla went with Paul when he left Corinth. Paul had become quite close with them while in Corinth. They shared a common vocation with Paul. Paul stayed with them and worked with them while he was in Corinth. Also, like Paul, they were newcomers to the city. They came to Corinth from Rome after all the Jews were expelled just before Paul left Syrian Antioch for his second journey to spread the gospel. While working together, Paul had a unique opportunity to disciple Aquila and Priscilla.

Before departing on the journey, Paul cut off his hair because of a vow. This vow was a Nazarite vow. First Fruits of Zion in their work Chronicles of the Apostles describes the prevalence of the Nazarite vow at this time.

Rabbinic literature attests to the popularity of the vow in the late Second Temple Period. The Mishnah dedicates an entire tractate to the subject.ⁱ

Josephus tells us in his work Antiquities of the Jews that Herod Agrippa paid for the sacrifices of many Nazarites who were waiting to fulfill their vows when he came to power.ⁱⁱ

The purpose of the vow was to separate oneself to the LORD for a period of time.

Numbers 6:1-2 NKJV 1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD,

Any man or woman could undertake a Nazarite vow. Chapter six of Numbers goes on to describe the conditions of the vow. Anyone making a Nazarite vow was to follow three guidelines during his or her time of separation. The first was to avoid any wine, juice or anything made from grapes. The second was to grow their hair for the entire period of the vow. At the end of the vow, their hair was cut and burned on the altar. The last provision included that the one making the vow was to avoid becoming unclean from touching or coming near a dead body. This included the body of any near relative who might die during the period of the vow. If the one making the vow became unclean because of contact with a dead body, he or she had to cut off their hair and begin the period of separation again.

Numbers 6:9 NKJV 9, 12 'And if anyone dies very suddenly beside him, and he defiles his consecrated head, then he shall shave his head on the day of his cleansing; on the seventh day he shall shave it... 12 'He shall consecrate to the LORD the days of his separation, and bring a male lamb in its first year as a trespass offering; but the former days shall be lost, because his separation was defiled.

We don't know the circumstances under which Paul undertook the Nazarite vow. Nor do we know if shaving his head indicated the beginning of the vow, an interruption of the vow due to touching a dead body, or the completion of the vow. However, his next step after having his head shaved was to go to Jerusalem and make the appropriate sacrifices.

Paul's first stop on his journey was a brief layover at Ephesus. Paul had wanted to bring the gospel of salvation to Ephesus earlier on this journey but he was kept from going there by the Holy Spirit.

Acts 16:6 NKJV 6 Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia.

Now, when he had finally come to Ephesus, the Jews received his words and wanted to hear more. However, Paul was on a mission; he needed to be in Jerusalem for the next feast. However, he was able to leave his good friends and disciples Aquila and Priscilla to teach the good news of the gospel to the Ephesians.

Acts 18:19-21 NKJV 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.

Paul strongly desired to visit Ephesus again, but was aware that his paths were directed by the LORD and he would go where the Holy Spirit directed him. At this time, it was necessary that he go to Jerusalem to bring the offerings for his vow. After spending a Sabbath at Ephesus, Paul continued on his journey.

Acts 18:22 NKJV 22 And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch.

Luke doesn't tell us anything about Paul's visit to Jerusalem other than he greeted the church. In order to observe the Feast at Jerusalem, Paul would have needed to have arrived seven days before the Feast. Coming from the diaspora, he would have needed to undergo ritual cleansing probably including being sprinkled with the water of the ashes of the red heifer. LeCornu and Shulam in their work Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Acts identify this feast as most likely being the Feast of Sukkot.ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps Paul would have arrived in Jerusalem in time to celebrate the entire three weeks of the fall feasts of the LORD.

While in Jerusalem, Paul would have met with other leaders of the body of believers. He may have spoken in some of the synagogues and shared how the gospel message was going out to Macedonia. He may also have

been in Jerusalem when a near war broke out between the Samaritans and the Jews during the Feast of Sukkot in 51 CE. Tensions between the Galilean Jews and the Samaritans had risen because of a power struggle between the Roman procurators Marcus Antonius Felix, procurator over Galilee, and Ventidius Cumanus, procurator over Samaria. First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles explains:

Thanks to raids and provocations, tensions already ran high. Things got out of hand when Galilean pilgrims tried passing through Samaria on their way to celebrate Sukkot in Jerusalem.... As the pilgrimage caravan entered Samaritan territory near the city of Genae (modern Jenin), a Samaritan band attacked them, robbed them, and killed a great many of them, including a certain, prominent man. The Galilean pilgrims were ready to avenge the murders.^{iv}

The Jews brought their complaint to the Roman authorities in Caesarea which happened to be under the control of Cumanus. Not surprisingly, since the raid may have been at his instigation, Cumanus refused to act against the Samaritan band. Tensions were high in Jerusalem during the Feast of Sukkot and they would spill over into the next Feast of Passover. This incident may have encouraged Paul to take up a collection for the support of the believers in Jerusalem and the Galilee.

After the feast, Paul continued on his journey home to Antioch where he spent some time before once again heading out to Asia and Macedonia.

Acts 18:23 NKJV 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.

Paul's stated purpose on this journey was to strengthen the believers! This would be Paul's third trip through Galatia and Phrygia and his second trip to Macedonia. Paul began his journey by visiting Tarsus, Lystra, Derbe, and Pisidian Antioch in Galatia. From there, he would travel on to Ephesus where he would spend roughly two years. The NKJV Study Bible comments on Paul's third trip.

Paul visited the churches of Galatia for a third time, and then settled in Ephesus for more than two years. Upon leaving Ephesus, Paul traveled again to Macedonia and Achaia (Greece) for a three-month stay. He returned to Asia by Macedonia. On this third journey Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, 2 Corinthians from Macedonia, and the letter to the Romans from Corinth.^v

One of the topics that Paul would address on this journey was how the Gentile believers could help support the poor, especially those in Jerusalem. Paul writes to the Corinthian believers that he will expect a contribution from them like he had instructed the churches in Galatia when he visited them.

1 Corinthians 16:1-5 NKJV 1 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: 2 On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. 3 And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. 4 But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me. 5 Now I will come to you when I pass through Macedonia (for I am passing through Macedonia).

While Paul was celebrating the feast at Jerusalem and resting in Antioch, Aquila and Priscilla were busy in Ephesus! An Alexandrian Jew also came to Ephesus bringing the good news of the coming of the Messiah.

Acts 18:24-25 NKJV 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.

When we think of the ministry of John the Baptist, we tend to think of it only in terms of Israel. John didn't have a huge outreach ministry. He never went far from the Jordan River. Yet Apollos, a man from Alexandria in Egypt had heard and received the message of John. Maybe Apollos had journeyed to Israel, heard about John and went to the Jordan to hear him teach. Perhaps he heard the words of John when he spoke about Yeshua.

Mark 1:1-4 NKJV 1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the Prophets: "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You." 3 "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.'" 4 John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

Apollos took the words of John that he either heard from John or heard from someone else who was with John and studied the scripture. Luke describes Apollos as being mighty in scripture and having received instruction in the way of the LORD. Even though he did not yet know Yeshua as the Messiah, he taught accurately. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him teach in the synagogue, they went to him to explain what he was still missing in his teaching.

Acts 18:26 NKJV 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.

We can infer that Aquila and Priscilla told Apollos that Yeshua was the Messiah whom Apollos spoke about. After Aquila and Priscilla gave Apollos additional instruction, he continued to preach about the Messiah in Ephesus, and then in Corinth.

Acts 18:27-28 NKJV 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.

Apollos was particularly successful among the Jewish population of Corinth. He used his knowledge of the scripture to demonstrate that Yeshua was indeed the Messiah promised by Moses and the prophets. His success and popularity in Corinth was such that some of the Corinthians began to brag that they were disciples of Apollos while others bragged about being disciples of Paul or even Peter. When Paul heard of this rivalry, he was extremely displeased. This division is the first topic of Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 1:10-13 NKJV 10 Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. 11 For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. 12 Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

The theme of divisions in the body due to this rivalry is the major focus of the first four chapters of Paul's letter. Paul concludes this section of his letter with the admonition to imitate his ways.

1 Corinthians 4:14-17 NKJV 14 I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. 15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. 16 Therefore I urge you, imitate me.

17 For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.

Paul encourages the believers in Corinth to follow him as he follows Yeshua. In his first letter to the Thessalonian congregation, Paul also instructed them to follow his example.

1 Thessalonians 1:6-7 MKJV 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, welcoming the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you were examples to all who believe in Macedonia and Achaia.

At some point, Apollos returns to Ephesus and is in Ephesus at the time that Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians. Paul encouraged Apollos to return to Corinth, but Apollos was unwilling to do so at that time.

1 Corinthians 16:12 MKJV 12 As regards our brother Apollos, I greatly desired him to come to you with the brothers, but it was not altogether his will that he come now. But he will come when he has opportunity.

After traveling through Galatia and Phrygia, Paul would finally make it to Ephesus. We may ask why Paul felt that he needed to travel to Galatia and Phrygia before going to Ephesus. After all, he had been wanting to travel to Ephesus for a long while. Also, after his brief appearance in Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem, Paul knew that his message would be favorably received. However, Paul went to Galatia and Phrygia first to strengthen the believers. As we look at Paul's previous actions, we see that this was a priority for Paul. After his first visit to the Galatian cities of Antioch, Lystra and Iconium, before returning to his home base in Syrian Antioch, Paul retraced his steps to strengthen the believers.

Acts 14:21-22 NKJV 21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

He did the same thing for Syrian Antioch after his first visit there. Strengthening the faith of believers was an important part of Paul's ministry. It was only after he completed that phase of his journey that Paul turned to the new work in Ephesus.

Study Questions:

1. Who are the people in the Bible who took a Nazarite vow? What were the circumstances, if they are given?
2. Describe how Aquila and Priscilla approach Apollos with a "more accurate" understanding of the scriptures. Why would they use this approach?
3. In Acts 18:21 Paul says he will return to Ephesus "God willing." What does this tell us about Paul?
4. How does Paul's actions in this passage show that he still follows Torah?
5. What can we learn from Paul's emphasis on strengthening the body of believers before going to Ephesus?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

Bonus: How did Paul address the problem of divisions in the Corinthian congregation? (1 Corinthians 1-4)

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ⁱ Chronicles of the Apostles. D.T. Lancaster. First Fruits of Zion. ©2016. P.584.

ⁱⁱ Josephus. Antiquities of the Jews. Book 19, ch.6, 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chronicles of the Apostles. D.T. Lancaster. First Fruits of Zion. ©2016. P.599.

^{iv} Chronicles of the Apostles. D.T. Lancaster. First Fruits of Zion. ©2016. P.588.

^v NKJV Study Bible. Earl D. Racmacher, Th.D., General Editor. Thomas Nelson ©2007. Page 1748.