

TUTORIAL

2.23

Paul teaches in Ephesus, impacting people there & beyond

After a time in Syrian Antioch, Paul sets out on his third major church planting and establishing trip. After travelling across country he eventually arrives in Ephesus. Paul stays in Ephesus for at least two more years, teaching the truth with widespread results throughout the entire region.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts 18:23-19:10.**

Last time

Paul and his team travelled to Thessalonica where a number of people were persuaded by the Gospel message and a church was planted. When trouble began to brew, Paul and Silas moved on to Berea. Here their audience is noted for the care they took in studying God's Word for themselves to verify that the visitors' teaching was accurate. When opponents of the truth made further work impossible, Paul went to Athens, where he gave his famous speech to the intellectuals of the city on Mars Hill. He then travelled to Corinth where he found accommodation and work with a couple, Priscilla and Aquila. Paul stayed in Corinth for around two years teaching God's Word, before concluding what is known as his *second missionary journey* by heading back to Antioch via Ephesus and Jerusalem.

Paul starts his third church planting trip

Paul probably stays in Antioch of Syria for as much as six months before heading off again to visit the churches in the region of Asia Minor...the area we know today as Anatolia in Turkey (Acts 18:23). He is not planting new churches but rather strengthening those already there. It's clear that Paul does not take on himself the responsibility of sharing the Gospel with every person or even every community. Having seen a group saved, he *does* take on a long-term role of continuing to strengthen, challenge, equip and even correct when they are moving away from the truth. But from the letters we have recorded that he's writing to these groups of believers, it's clear that he wants to see *them* reaching out to their own communities and beyond, as a natural outcome of their growing maturity in Christ.

It should also be noted that as he visits these churches, he's not functioning as their overall leader or *bishop*, in a hierarchical sense. He and his co-workers have not created a denomination. The Lord has given him the status of *Apostle*, with all the inherent authority in being one of God's human spokesmen during this period when the written Narrative is being completed. And so there are times where he does speak to the churches from the platform of *Apostolic authority*...but even then it is something he uses sparingly and carefully. Paul understands that his role is to equip individuals and teams of leaders within the local *ecclesia* to function *under* and *through* the authority of God's revealed Word so *they* can encourage, guide, equip and correct the believers entrusted to their care.

A promising new teacher comes to Ephesus

Luke inserts a "meanwhile" here as he takes a moment to explain what has been happening in Ephesus, which is where Paul will spend a large chunk of his time on what has become known as his *third missionary journey* (*Acts 18:24-28*). We'll remember that on his voyage back to Syria at the end of his last expedition, Paul stopped briefly in this city that was the capital of the province of Asia. Finding interest in the Gospel message in the synagogue, he'd promised that he would come back.

In the meantime, while he's been in Antioch and now travelling across country visiting the churches, Paul's friends Priscilla and Aquila have been busy. They've come to know a Jewish man, Apollos, who has moved to Ephesus from his home city of Alexandria, 800 kilometres across the Mediterranean in Egypt. Somehow he has heard of and believed in Jesus the Messiah, even passionately preaching about Him in the synagogue, but there are some fundamentals he's not clear about. For example, he doesn't understand the meaning of baptism under the New Covenant or about the Holy Spirit's role. But Paul's tent-making friends, Priscilla and Aquila, have been faithfully helping Apollos understand more of the Narrative, and their efforts bear fruit...he will go on to be a very effective teacher of God's Word among the churches in the area. In fact, while Paul is headed towards Ephesus from the east, Apollos is visiting the believers in Corinth where he proves to be a powerful apologist for the Gospel message.

God gives powerful evidence of the Spirit's presence

So Paul finally reaches the Aegean coast, having come across country from Antioch in Syria, a journey of around 1000 kilometres (*Acts 19:1-6*). What he sees as he arrives is an impressive city spread over two hills with the Cayster River mouth between, forming an excellent harbour... although in the centuries ahead, this will silt up, eventually causing the city to be abandoned. Ephesus is probably the fourth largest city in the world at this time, home to quarter of a

million people. This city, where he'll end up living and working for the next three years, is widely renowned for its architecturally magnificent temple to the goddess *Artemis*.

He is immediately immersed in the things his life has been all about for many years now, sharing the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ. He finds that there are a handful of people in Ephesus who've already come to believe in Jesus as Messiah, probably as the result of the witness of Apollos. Naturally enough, given the gaps in their teacher's understanding, they are missing some areas of truth. The only type of baptism they know about is what John had done in the Jordan river for people who wanted to repent and prepare their hearts for the coming Messiah. But now, when Paul explains, these followers of Christ are glad to go through the simple baptism ceremony for the New Covenant. They also hear from Paul for the first time how, under the New Covenant, God's Spirit comes to live permanently in people when they come to faith. So now, to reinforce this reality, God chooses to show the Spirit's presence with them in a kind of mini-Pentecost. Paul puts his hand on their heads and no doubt asks God to give these young believers and others around a special demonstration of how the Spirit fills His people and equips them as His witnesses. God graciously does exactly that, and they are suddenly able to speak in other languages and communicate truth directly from God - to *prophecy*.

Events like these, during this period when God is allowing people to see tangible evidence of the Holy Spirit's full presence with them, must have been incredibly exciting. But it's important for us to clearly understand the full extent of what God has revealed to us in our time through His written Narrative. If we do have the correct perspective and value the most important things, we are able to recognize the exciting evidence of His presence with us and His powerful work in the world today, even if it looks different from the dramatic signs He gave at certain key points in the transitional time of the Apostles. And if we have opportunity, like Paul did in Ephesus, we can share His Narrative with others in such a way that they glimpse the amazing possibilities now open to them as the permanent, earthly residence and co-workers of the all-powerful Spirit Creator.

Paul and the believers leave the synagogue

Paul spends the next three months in Ephesus, as he'd promised on his previous stay, concentrating on sharing in the synagogue setting where people are familiar with the Old Testament Narrative. No doubt using that as a starting point, he is able to show very clearly how it has been God's plan all along for Jesus to break the power of Satan, the usurper, and lay the foundations for ultimately bringing all of creation back under God's sovereign rule. But even though his message is clear, some of those he's been interacting with choose to reject the truth, even publicly voicing their opposition to Jesus' claims of being the only Way to God (Acts 19:8-9).

Luke records that in the face of this rejection, Paul stops sharing truth in the synagogue. And, even more significantly, he encourages those who have believed to break from their association there and develop a separate identity. Paul's decision to guide the believers in this way is worth noting. Without making the mistake of developing dogma from one incident, we can simply observe that in this instance, the Apostle can see that remaining *inside* the existing religious structure will not be the best thing - either for those who've rejected the truth that has so clearly been shared with them, or for the young believers.

We should also remember that this is probably not just a casual matter of no longer turning up at the synagogue for Sabbath meetings. For some of them at least, this must surely involve rejection by their families and community and being accused of turning away from their religious and social heritage in favour of this "new Jesus cult". We don't know if some perhaps argued that they'd have more chance of reaching their Jewish community by staying *inside* the synagogue setting...all we can say is that from his experience and God-given wisdom, Paul encourages them to make a clean break as a group of believers. They will go on to become the church to whom he'll write the letter that is preserved in the New Testament.

Paul's teaching has widespread impact

Over the next couple of years, Paul teaches regularly in a lecture hall in Ephesus, and whether through his own work or through existing co-workers or new believers that he equips, the Gospel spreads throughout the province of Asia (Acts 19:9,10). It seems likely that it is during this time that three churches are established in a cluster of communities - Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae - at the foot of Mount Cadmus, around 160 kilometers to the east of Ephesus. In a letter Paul will later write to the Colossian believers, he mentions that even though he cares deeply for them and the other churches in the area, he has never met them in person, e.g: (Colossians 1:4-9, 2:1). So whether as a result of Paul's teaching and discipleship in Ephesus during this time, or through people who were saved on his previous travels to the north, churches are being planted as an outcome of Paul's teaching and discipleship but without his direct involvement.

When we think of Paul involved in his ministry, we often focus on the opposition he faces, the beatings, the imprisonment and so on. But something else worth noting and drawing inspiration from is his diligence and hard work. At times it is physical discipline, getting up and on the road each day until evening, to cover the thousands of kilometers he travels as he visits different places. There are also the times when he's working at his trade to pay his own way and not be a burden on the local believers. Another kind of hard work is involved in constantly meeting and talking with people, building friendships, listening to them, and looking for ways to move the conversation on to the deeper things. And then there is the task of teaching truth, day after day. Of

course that is challenging when it's in the face of indifference and hostility; but even when it is with a group of hungry young believers, the burden of encouraging, guiding and helping them to apply truth for months on end involves a great deal of commitment and perseverance on Paul's part. During this time and later in prison, Paul will conscientiously be writing down truth revealed to him by the Spirit that he'll send in letters to individuals and to churches. Putting in the effort to think and write for hours is yet another kind of discipline that perhaps he didn't naturally relish. And finally - something we don't often think of as hard work - he will later describe in those letters how he is in prayer for specific people and local groups, actively, and even rigorously, entrusting them into the Lord's care.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Is there anything you can see in God's Narrative so far that helps us evaluate whether *denominations* are necessary and healthy for the Church today? Can you picture some ways that, unlike Paul, a church planting team today - even in an area not previously impacted by the Church - might have to consider the issue of denominationalism?
2. In your own words describe what is meant by "baptism of the Spirit" in the New Testament. As you consider the Narrative, particularly what Luke is describing in Acts, explain why you believe God sometimes gave amazing signs when certain groups were *baptized in the Spirit*. Should we; (a) always, (b) sometimes, or (c) never, expect to see similar signs today?
3. Trying to draw from the Narrative so far, reflect on what you feel were probably the main motivations that Paul drew on for the blend of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual discipline needed for him to keep going, year after year. Do you think his lifestyle was 'over the top' or obsessive? Do you think such a lifestyle would be excessive for someone else...for you?



ACTIVITIES

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1. Do some online research (beyond Wikipedia) and in about half a page:
 - a) Summarize the contemporary debate about *Insider Movements*.
 - b) Share any thoughts you have on this issue in light of what we have covered in the Acts account so far.