



DEVOTIONAL

Years ago, there was a button that read, PBPWMGINFWMY. These jumbled letters stood for, “Please be patient with me; God is not finished with me yet.” If we all could keep that in mind, we would be more kind, patient, and forgiving toward one another. We are all people in process. We come from a variety of backgrounds. We each have different spiritual gifts and different experiences with the Lord. And we’re all at different places in our walk with the Lord.

There may be some who attend here regularly, but who have not yet put their trust in Christ as Savior. They’re learning about who Jesus is and what He did in dying on the cross. They’re reading the Bible and assimilating the teaching that is there. But they have not yet taken that crucial step of trusting in Christ as Savior and Lord. We who have trusted in Christ need to remember that we once were where they are, and we need to treat them with patience and grace, giving instruction when there is opportunity.

There are others here who are babes in Christ. It’s a brand-new life for them to follow the Lord Jesus. There is much that they do not yet know, much less practice. But they’re in process, and those of us who are farther down the road need to treat them with the same tolerance that we show to our children when they are young. We shouldn’t expect a one-year-old to act like a ten-year-old, or a ten-year-old to act like an 18-year-old. Rather, we should model mature behavior to them, and gently when we’re able, help them understand how to live in a more mature manner. But none of us has arrived at total sanctification. We’re all in process.

Our text shows us God’s work and God’s workers in process. It’s a passage of Scripture where I wish that the Lord had seen fit to give us more details than He did. Luke raises a lot of questions that he doesn’t seem to answer. What was Paul’s vow? Why did he take it? Was he right or wrong to take a vow? Should Christians today take vows? Why didn’t Paul stay on at Ephesus when the Jews there were uncharacteristically open to his message? Why was his visit to Jerusalem so short? What happened there? Was Apollos a believer before Priscilla and Aquila explained things to him? If so, what did he lack? Why does Luke skim over some fairly important details in Paul’s ministry here, such as the conclusion of his second missionary journey and the start of his third journey? What happened to Timothy and Silas?

A common thread with this section and with the paragraph we will study next week is that we see people in process, and God using these people to accomplish His work of spreading the gospel and building His church. The lesson is,

To accomplish His work of proclaiming the gospel and strengthening the church, God uses workers who are all in process.¹

¹ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-46-god-s-workers-process-acts-1818-28>

OPEN IT

1. Luke speaks about Paul cutting his hair in our text this week. Share your routine for haircuts. Has there ever been a time when a routine haircut became a disaster?

READ IT

Acts 18:18–28

EXPLORE IT

2. Who travels to Syria with Paul?
3. What was Paul's response to staying longer in Ephesus?
4. What does Luke tell us about Apollos?
5. What did Aquila and Priscilla do upon hearing Apollos speak?
6. What does Apollos do upon his arrival in Achaia?

APPLY IT

SUPERCUTS OR GREAT CLIPS: YOU DECIDE

After eighteen months of ministry, Paul decided that it was God's will for him to leave Corinth and return to his home church in Antioch. His friends Priscilla and Aquila (note how Luke varies the order of their names) accompanied him to Ephesus and remained there when he departed for Caesarea. In Acts 18:24, we will pick up the story of the church in Ephesus and the important part played by Aquila and Priscilla. Cenchræa was the seaport for Corinth, and there was a Christian congregation there (Romans 16:1).

Here Paul had his head shorn, "*for he had a vow.*" This probably refers to the Nazarite vow described in Numbers 6. Since the Nazarite vow was purely voluntary, Paul was not abandoning grace for law when he undertook it. The vow was not a matter of salvation but of personal devotion to the Lord. He allowed his hair to grow for a specific length of time and then cut it when the vow was completed. He also abstained from using the fruit of the vine in any form.

We are not told why Paul took this vow. Perhaps it was a part of his special dedication to God during the difficult days of the early ministry in Corinth. Or perhaps the vow was an expression of gratitude to God for all that He had done for him and his associates. According to Jewish law, the Nazarite vow had to be completed in Jerusalem with the offering of the proper sacrifices. The hair was shorn at the completion of the vow, not at the beginning, and it was not necessary for one to be in Jerusalem to make the vow.²

7. Paul seems to have taken a biblical tradition and used it to draw closer to God. What traditions do we have that we can use to help strengthen or grow our walk with God?

8. Paul chooses something visible (no haircut) to announce to God and others his inward dedication and thanks to God. How is this type of outward expression beneficial? In what ways could it be counterproductive?

²Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Daring (Acts 13–28): Put Your Faith Where the Action Is (The BE Series Commentary)* (p. 76). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

Are vows for us? Many readers may be surprised to find Paul performing vows (v. 18), which they see as alien to the spirit of Christianity. The New Testament, outside Acts, says little about vows except to warn about their misuse (Matthew 5:34–37). But we have two instances in Acts in which Paul made vows, which may suggest that they deserve a second look. This is especially so because they were an integral part of biblical religion in the Old Testament. Paul, being a Jew, continued to practice this discipline, which, though not mandatory, was regarded as helpful for one’s spiritual health.

Vows have always been important within Roman Catholicism, but the Reformers reacted to them “on the grounds that, amongst other things, they implied a form of righteousness by works, [and] imposed human obligations that were not demanded by Christ.” R. J. Song has shown that John Calvin, however, regarded them as a valuable tool for personal spiritual discipline and laid down rules for their use.... Handled discerningly and with imagination, vows could be a God-given resource to strengthen resolve and enable one to rise above immediate circumstances, and to restore continuity to our lives fractured by the pressures of a disorienting world. We should take a second look at this practice as a source of spiritual help.³

ON THE OTHER HAND...

Donald Grey Barnhouse states dogmatically, “Here, Paul was definitely out of the will of the Lord. He had no right to take this vow.... This was deliberate sin on his part” (Acts [Zondervan], pp. 168–169)⁴

9. Read Matthew 5:33–37. How should we balance the contradicting teaching of Jesus and the experience of Paul in our text? Is it ever appropriate for a Christian to make a vow or oath to God?

There are occasions, following times when we have experienced the goodness of God to a remarkable degree, when we want to say with the hymn writer, “Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.”⁵

10. While Paul’s forgoing haircuts may not be your “cup of tea,” when and how should we show this type of special gratitude and consecration to God?

³ Fernando, Ajith; Fernando, Ajith. *Acts (The NIV Application Commentary Book 5)* (pp. 448-449). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-46-god-s-workers-process-acts-1818-28>

⁵ Thomas, Derek W. H. *Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries)* (p. 529). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

STRAIGHT OUTTA CORINTH

In Paul's day, provision was made for those away from Jerusalem at the termination of their vow to shave their heads, as Paul did, then within thirty days present the hair at the Temple (cf. Josephus Wars, 2.15.1). The phrase "he was keeping a vow" indicates a process not yet completed. That required his arrival in Jerusalem. Having crossed the Aegean Sea as they sailed eastward, Paul and his party came to Ephesus, the most important city in Asia Minor. Paul left Priscilla and Aquila there to become settled and establish their business. They apparently remained in Ephesus for a few years, had a church meet in their home (1 Corinthians 16:19), and eventually returned to Rome (Romans 16:3–5). Paul himself, as was his common strategy, entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

As in Berea, he was well received, so much so that the Jews asked him to stay for a longer time. His response to this great opportunity gives a clear testimony to the seriousness of his vow. He refused to stay! In a hurry to reach Jerusalem because of his vow, and (as some Greek manuscripts add) to reach the city before the Feast (probably Passover), he did not consent. Regretfully taking leave of them and saying, "I will return to you again if God wills," he set sail from Ephesus.⁶

11. What does Paul's refusal to stay in Ephesus (amidst such a welcoming group) tell us about open doors of ministry in our own lives?

At times, no doubt, God will firmly close the door on our attempts, but at other times He is no doubt waiting for us to exert the effort to break through a seemingly closed door. On the flip side, God may initially open a door that He will later close. Just as an initial closed door should not be read as final, so an initial open door should not necessarily be understood as final.

12. Paul tells the people in Ephesus that he will return "if God wills." How would Paul know if God was willing him to go back to Ephesus? In what ways are we able to discern God's will for our own lives today?

In these verses we have the travel record of Paul after he left Ephesus. His ship arrived in the port city of Caesarea. He went to Jerusalem and "greeted the church" (no doubt taking the time to fulfill his vow in the Temple), after which he travelled to Antioch.

Just a note here: This loop was some 2,500km and involved a considerable portion of time. I would think that it also involved some wonderful ministry and further wonderful displays of God's providence. However, we are left in the dark as to these details. Barclay notes, "We may see very clearly here how much we do not know about Paul. Acts 18:23–19:1 describe a journey of no less than 1,500 miles, and it is dismissed with barely a reference. There are untold tales of heroism of Paul which we will never know."⁷

⁶ MacArthur, John. Acts 13–28 *MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series)* (Kindle Locations 2995–3006). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/the-providence-of-god/>

13. Far too often today Christians struggle with inconsistency in our worship attendance and service to God and come up with myriads of excuses and reasons as to why this is so. How does Paul’s faithfulness in ministry challenge some of our approach and thinking regarding Christian service and worship?

14. Paul went from city to city greeting and strengthening churches. What are some ways that you are helping to strengthen your church right now? Who specifically is being impacted through your service?

NEXT TOP MODEL... I MEAN PREACHER

Apollos was a native of Alexandria, Egypt, where a million Jews lived. Highly educated, he knew his way around the Old Testament. He believed in Jesus through the teachings of John the Baptist. A skilled orator, he was a fiery, courageous preacher. As a student of John the Baptist, Apollos knew the basics about Jesus, but lacked important facts needed to effectively communicate the good news.

- He knew Jews demonstrated readiness to receive Christ by repentance and baptism (see Luke 3: 3-14).
- He knew Jesus was the Savior— John called him “Lamb of God” (see John 1: 29-34).
- He knew Christ would baptize people with the Holy Spirit (see Luke 3: 16).
- He “had been instructed in the way of the Lord” (Acts 18: 25 nkjv)— the way of life modeled by Jesus.

He was probably in the dark about the church’s decision to accept Gentiles without requiring them to live under Jewish law (see Acts 15:28–29). Also, Alexandrian Jews tended to interpret the Bible allegorically rather than literally— perhaps Apollos needed correction at that point. Priscilla and Aquila took him under their wing and “*explained to him the way of God more accurately*” (Acts 18:26 NKJV). After that Apollos was an unstoppable apologist for Christ (Acts 18:27–28). He went to Europe and developed an appreciative following at Corinth.⁸

15. Apollos was a man who had been blessed by God with a great charismatic personality as well as great eloquence and excellence in his speaking. How can these two things distract us from seeing areas of weakness when it comes to leaders in the church?

⁸ Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 4071-4085). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

Priscilla and Aquila give us a good model of how a high-capacity teacher should be corrected. They don't rebuke Apollos publicly. They don't embarrass or shame him. They demonstrate humility and compassion in addressing him, but they also demonstrate conviction. That is, they don't just let the matter of his deficiency go. Instead, they address the gap in his instruction in a Christ-honoring way. They take him aside, perhaps to their home (v. 26 NIV), and gently explain baptism fully. Every Christian should take note of this couple's gentle persuasion method, which is advocated elsewhere in the New Testament and demonstrated by Jesus, the Servant of the Lord (Matthew 12:17-21; 2 Timothy 2:24-26).⁹

16. Our text tells us that Priscilla and Aquila approached Apollos with some constructive criticism regarding his doctrine. When is it appropriate for us to correct someone else's doctrine, and how should we go about doing this?

Apollos's attitude in this passage is instructive, too. Think about it. This guy probably had far more education than Aquila and Priscilla combined, but he maintained a teachable heart. He listened to their counsel and adopted their position. This is a reminder that we should never think we are beyond the need for further instruction in God's Word—no matter how long we have been Christians or how many degrees we hold.¹⁰

17. Luke seems to imply that Apollos was open and willing to hear the critique from Priscilla and Aquila. What is your response when others critique you?

18. Luke tells us that when Apollos arrived in Achaia that "the brothers encouraged him." How can we encourage those who teach and lead in the church?

⁹ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 6202-6207). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 6212-6215). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

Apollos was used in a mighty way to strengthen the local church that Paul had planted in Achaia. In fact, in 1 Corinthians, Paul notes that he had planted, and Apollos had watered (3:5–6). And it appears that Apollos was so effective in this ministry that some even became sectarian around him (1:12).

19. There was and still is a tendency amongst Christians to elevate gifted Bible teachers or pastors to celebrity status. What causes this and what dangers come with it?

20. Paul seems to take a back seat in our passage to the likes of Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos. Who do you see being used by God among you today? What can you do this week to encourage and thank them for their ministry to you and God's kingdom?