

Apollos, Eloquent But Raw

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[0 : 00] Well, let us bow our heads together for some prayer.

Indeed, we've been praying. We've been asking the Lord in the last verse of our hymn to defend us with his spirit in the knowledge that at the end we shall life inherit.

Amen. Dear God, our Father in heaven, we thank you so much for this wonderful assurance of the Bible, something quite beyond our understanding, and yet we believe it and accept it because you have promised it to us, that we shall inherit eternal life as we place our trust firmly in the Lord Jesus.

Jesus, we confess to you again, dear Heavenly Father, that what we need is a Savior, and you have sent us your Son for that very purpose, not simply to teach us how to live, but he certainly does that, but above all to save us, to save us from the judgment at the end, to save us from the wrath of God that we deserve.

But our Lord Jesus, our Savior, we rejoice again, dear Father, to think of the way that he came, that he left the glory and the bliss and the beauty and the joy of your immediate presence in heaven.

[1 : 32] And he took the long road to earth and the long, long road to Jerusalem. And there he was willing to offer himself up as a sacrifice so that he might bring the propitiation of your wrath that was needed.

So we thank you so much. And we pray for all of us who are here today that you will help us to continue to trust him and to hold on to him and to grow stronger in our assurance and confidence that eternal life awaits us through what the Lord Jesus has done by his wonderful intervention.

So please, dear Father, build us up today through the Bible. Help us to have open ears and warm hearts, hearts ready to obey. And we pray that you will find us servants who are willing to serve you, to stand for you, to fear not what men say, but rather to labor night and day to be a real pilgrim as we journey towards the wonderful promised land.

And we ask all these things in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Amen. Amen. Well, we're continuing our studies in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 18, just the 18th chapter.

And you might like to turn with me to that chapter again, which you'll find on page 927 in our big church Bibles. Page 927. Our passage for today is the last paragraph, verses 24 to 28, about Apollos.

[3 : 04] But to pick up the story, I'll read from verse 18. In the earlier part of the chapter, Luke, the evangelist, the author, has been telling us about Paul's initial stay in Corinth and his preaching of the gospel there, a stay which lasted something like two years.

So picking it up from verse 18, we have Paul's travels and then this little bit about Apollos. So verse 18. After this, Paul stayed in Corinth many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria and with him Priscilla and Aquila.

At Cancra, he had cut his hair for he was under a vow. And they came to Ephesus and he left them there. But he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. But on taking leave of them, he said, I will return to you if God wills. And he set sail from Ephesus.

When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

[4 : 25] Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord.

And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue.

But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him.

When he arrived, 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.

And I'll just read one more verse to give us a bit more historical context. And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples.

[5 : 33] Amen. Well now, as I say, our passage for today is this short but very interesting little paragraph about Apollos in verses 24 to 28.

The big question is, as you read this little paragraph, the big question is, why does Luke, the author, insert this little paragraph here? That's the question which I've been bothering my head with over the last few days.

It really is a most interesting question. And I've wished that I could ask Luke himself directly, but I wasn't allowed to put a phone call through to heaven. So I've been asking the Lord to help me to use my brain and try and work it out.

Well, it's abundantly clear that from Acts chapter 13, right the way through to the end of the book of Acts, Luke is telling us the story of Paul. Roughly speaking, the first 40% of the book of Acts tells the story of Peter, and the remaining 60% of the story tells the tale of Paul.

So this little paragraph at the end of verse chapter 18 is not some random insertion. It's part and parcel of Luke's account of the work of Paul. And the connection between Paul and Apollos hinges on the gospel work in Ephesus and in Corinth, and particularly Corinth.

[6 : 54] Let's look at the story immediately before and after the paragraph on Apollos. Back at verse 18, which we were looking at last week, Paul leaves Corinth, accompanied by his new friends Aquila and Priscilla, and at verse 19, you'll see the three of them come to Ephesus.

Paul then leaves Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus, and he then travels for quite a long time, eventually returning to Ephesus at chapter 19, verse 1.

And at that point, he begins his long stay, his three-year stay at Ephesus. But between Paul's very brief initial visit to Ephesus, in Acts 18, verse 19, and the start of his long stay there at chapter 19, verse 1, Apollos comes to Ephesus, verse 24, in Paul's absence.

So he begins to preach there at Ephesus, fervently, but rather deficiently, as we shall see. And Aquila and Priscilla, who knew Paul's gospel thoroughly, take him on one side and give him a bit of instruction.

Apollos then, having been in Ephesus for a while, at verse 27, then wishes to cross the Aegean Sea westwards to Achaia, which means really to Corinth. And so, endorsed by Aquila and Priscilla, and the others at Ephesus, who write a letter of commendation for him, he then crosses to Corinth, and he begins to preach there very effectively.

[8 : 19] And then, chapter 19, verse 1, while he is working at Corinth, and do you remember from 1 Corinthians, Paul planted, Apollos watered.

So Acts 19, verse 1, shows Apollos watering the young plant at Corinth, which Paul had planted there a couple of years previously. So while Apollos is watering at Corinth, Paul begins what is really a new work at Ephesus.

So the Corinthian church had had Paul with them for two years. It was he who started the church off, he who planted the young plant of the church there. And then, after roughly a year's gap, Apollos, this able speaker, arrives, and he begins to water the now-growing plant at Corinth.

But you will know, I'm sure, that in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul has to upbraid the church at Corinth for splitting up into factions. So he says to them in chapter 1, what is this that I hear?

Apparently, some of you are saying, I follow Paul. Others are saying, I follow Apollos. Others are saying, I follow Peter. And others are saying, I follow Christ. What absurdity is this?

[9 : 29] Is Christ divided? Of course not. Stop this childish nonsense and return to your senses. Now, the problems at Corinth were complex. There was bad behavior there at a number of different levels.

But you can't help suspecting, especially from what Luke says here in Acts 18 about Apollos, that some of the Corinthians were favoring Apollos over against Paul because Apollos was a more polished and accomplished speaker.

In fact, Paul admits both in 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians that he's not much of a speaker. Now, Luke is one of Paul's closest friends and colleagues and supporters.

Luke knows Paul like the back of his hand. And one of his great purposes in writing the Acts of the Apostles is to commend Paul and Paul's work to the wider church.

You see, Paul was always a controversial figure. And Luke is wanting to say to the wide readership, including us, Trust Paul. Follow Paul's example. He is the great model of Christian life and work.

[10 : 35] But here in our paragraph in Acts 18, Luke is also very clearly and very warmly commending Apollos. Now, why should he want to do that?

Well, we'll return to that a little bit later. So let me set things out today under two headings. First, Luke describes, in this chapter, in this passage, Luke describes the kind of preacher that the churches need.

Verses 24 to 28 are a bit like a miniature portrait. In art galleries, you find big, impressive portraits of famous people. And you find similar portraits in great country houses or in university halls.

But sometimes in art galleries, you find little miniatures, miniature portraits, which might be as small as six inches by six inches. Well, this passage here is like a miniature portrait.

And all the details concern Apollos' ability and training as a preacher and teacher. It's about his preaching and teaching. We're not told anything about what he looked like physically.

[11 : 38] We're not told the names of his parents or his age or anything like that. It's really just about his fitness as a Christian preacher and leader. And just look at the way Luke piles up his commendation, the words that he describes him, in just these few verses.

Eloquent, competent, instructed, fervent in spirit, accurate in teaching, bold in speech. And then in the last two verses, 27 and 8, greatly helping the believers at Corinth and powerfully refuting the Jews there in public.

You can almost hear Luke saying, if only we had a few more like this, the churches would be greatly blessed. So let's notice first in this little portrait of the preacher that he was eloquent, which means, I think, that he spoke in such a way as to command attention.

People wanted to listen to him because he spoke compellingly and with authority. He had the power of utterance. I can remember some years ago talking to my friend David Jackman.

David Jackman used to run the Cornhill training course in London. Some of you will know him or know of him. And David had been an undergraduate in Cambridge in the early 1960s, in about 1961.

[12 : 53] And he studied English there. And he told me that he used to go to the English faculty to hear the lectures of C.S. Lewis. who was a professor in Cambridge at the beginning of the 60s. So I said to David Jackman, Oh, it must have been wonderful.

Sitting there at the feet of Lewis, he must have been a terrific man to listen to. David said, Not at all. He was dreadfully limp and boring as a lecturer. I could hardly believe it because his books are so full of power and life, aren't they?

But apparently he was no Apollos when it came to the lecture hall. Apollos, you see, is different. He's eloquent. He knows how to speak. But just notice what lies behind his eloquence and gives its strength.

He was competent in the scriptures and instructed in the way of the Lord. So he didn't just have the gift of the gab. He had been trained in the scriptures.

And we know, because we've experienced it, we know that the kind of preaching that fortifies us and instructs us and gives us confidence, that sort of preaching is full of Bible content.

[13 : 55] The preacher knows his Bible and knows how to unearth its message. That's what builds us up. Now, some of you will know that my main job is to teach on our Cornhill training course here in the building next door.

And every September, we have a new crop of students who begin their training as preachers and teachers. It's always quite exciting as the new year begins. And it's very interesting to see how some of the students, when they come to us, have a natural eloquence and others don't.

But the ones that don't have what you might call a natural eloquence are not thereby doomed to ineffectiveness, as long as they keep working at getting to know the scriptures.

If they're trained in the Bible and they have a hunger to learn how to handle the scriptures well, they can still become very useful preachers. But here, for Apollos, the instruction he received is important.

In fact, this paragraph shows us that he was instructed in more than one way. First, in verse 25, you'll see he was instructed in the way of the Lord.

[15 : 00] Presumably back in Alexandria, where he came from in North Egypt at an earlier point in his life. But then secondly, in verse 26, he had further instruction given to him by Priscilla and Aquila.

Now, that is a fascinating detail. Here is this eloquent, fervent, gifted preacher, probably still quite a young man. And he comes to Ephesus and begins to speak. But, says Luke, he knows only the baptism of John, which implies that he didn't know what was the more important baptism, the baptism with the Holy Spirit, in other words, the new birth.

He knew John's baptism, which was a baptism of repentance and forgiveness. But the fullness of the gospel, the new birth into membership of God's kingdom, Apollos appeared to know nothing of that.

But, Aquila? Yes, my dear? I like Apollos. Yes, my dear, so do I. He's a gifted speaker, is he not?

Yes, she is very gifted. Do I detect a but? Yes, my dear, yes, indeed. I mean, he was very good on Sunday morning, wasn't he, when he was speaking about repentance and forgiveness.

[16 : 12] But you did notice, didn't you, that he said nothing about the spirit and the kingdom, did he? I'll tell you what, my darling Prisca. Let's have him round on Thursday for goat cutlets and sun-dried tomatoes.

And I think we'll have a word with him. You see, now that Paul is on his travels here and there, we are the most senior Christians here in Ephesus. And we owe it to the work and to the church and to Apollos himself to help him to a clearer understanding of the Lord Jesus and the good news.

Well, that's the kind of thing that happened in verse 26. Apollos was eloquent and able, but he needed further instruction. And you can just imagine the kind of relationship and the way in which Aquila and Priscilla would have set this up.

It required loving maturity on the part of Aquila and Priscilla, and it required humility and self-knowledge on the part of Apollos for that instruction to take place.

If Apollos had been less of a man than he was, he might have bridled at the suggestion that he needed further training. And if Aquila and Priscilla had been less mature and responsible than they were, they might have shrunk from the idea of taking this intellectually powerful young man on one side and offering to teach him.

[17 : 28] But the fact is they were responsible and he was humble and gifted and fervent, but he was also willing to be trained. Apollos was not a cocky young man who thought that he had nothing to learn.

But let's notice something else here about Apollos the preacher. Something which comes out in verses 27 and 28, because those verses describe how he set about his work in Corinth, having crossed the sea to Corinth.

Luke says when he arrived, halfway through 27, when he arrived in Corinth, he greatly helped the believers. Now, how did he greatly help the young Christians of Corinth?

Verse 28 tells us he helped them by powerfully refuting the Jews in public. Now, think of the situation. The Corinthian Christians were very young and inexperienced in the faith, and they were living amongst Jewish people who had fiercely resisted Paul a couple of years previously.

So the young Christians were under attack from these Jews, and the Jews would not accept that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Christ promised in the Old Testament. But Apollos, because he knew his Old Testament so well, was able to do for these young Christians what they could not do for themselves.

[18 : 47] He was able to enter into discussion and argument with these hostile Jews in public, and he was able to show them from the Old Testament that they were wrong about Jesus.

You can imagine this taking place perhaps in a hall like this, and the young Christians are sitting there listening agog to the public debate. And at the end of it, they go home rejoicing and greatly encouraged because they now have a champion whose reasoned arguments from the Old Testament are able to demonstrate the truth of the gospel.

So those Jews went home with their tails between their legs, but the young Christians went home with their minds and hearts greatly fortified. That's how Apollos helped them. He was able to defeat the Jews in public argument.

So Luke is showing us here something else about the preacher, and that is that he needs to be not only eloquent and instructed, he needs to be courageous as well.

He needs to be willing to refute in public the false positions of those who oppose the gospel. And this has really come home to me in recent years, and especially since I've been involved in training preachers and teachers.

[19 : 56] What we need in our preachers and teachers is not only a level of intellectual ability, but a great deal of moral courage as well.

Any Christian who takes a lead today in preaching and teaching has to be willing publicly to refute any position that opposes the truth of the Bible and the gospel.

So just to give a couple of examples, people today, quite a lot of people are saying, surely God will accept everybody into heaven in the end, whatever they've believed and however they've lived.

That's called universalism. God is going to save everybody. Now the Christian teacher needs to be able and willing to show from the Bible that that position is false and needs to show how it's false.

Or again, another example. The world is clamoring today, as we know, about how marvelous it is that a man can now marry a man and a woman can now marry a woman. And how wonderful it is that you can change your gender.

[20 : 56] You can't do that, by the way. All such talk is simply make-believe. But the Christian preacher and teacher needs to be able and willing to show from the scriptures how all that kind of thing is profoundly wrong in the sight of God.

And that requires courage because the Bible's teaching attracts great hostility over these things. The preacher or teacher who insists that the Bible opposes homosexuality and transgenderism and that the preacher who demonstrates that from the scriptures opens himself up to vilification and worse.

But Luke is saying to us here, look at the courage of Apollos. That's the kind of leadership that greatly helps the churches. when the false position is refuted in public.

That's what was going on as Apollos watered what Paul had planted. So Luke describes the kind of preacher that the churches need.

Able in speech, yes, instructed in the Bible and willing to refute in public, to tackle in public, the views that oppose the truth of the Bible. Well, now secondly, and much more briefly, Luke describes the kind of unity that the churches need.

[22 : 13] And this brings me back to where we started, to the question, why did Luke see fit to put in this short paragraph commending Apollos here? Why didn't he just move from chapter 18, verse 17, to the beginning of chapter 19?

Well, as I said earlier, Luke and Paul were great friends. And Luke is telling us in this second half of the book of Acts, the story of Paul and how Paul eventually reached Rome in his endeavors to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth.

But Luke would surely have been well aware of the troubles at Corinth, the divisions in the church there, how one group in the church were claiming to follow Paul, another group were following Apollos, apparently, another group following Peter, and so on.

If there was a Peter group, perhaps they were lionizing Peter because he was one of the 12, one of the original apostles, and therefore seemed closer to Jesus, more authentic.

The Paul group perhaps identified with him because it was he who had first brought the gospel to them, and therefore they were affectionate, they attached to him. And the Apollos group almost certainly were impressed by Apollos' ability as a powerful preacher.

[23 : 23] So just think of the effect that this paragraph in Acts 18 might have had on the Christians at Corinth. They would have said, Paul is Luke's great friend.

Luke is commending Paul in this book for chapter after chapter. So you might expect a man who is so obviously pro-Paul to be anti-Apollos. And after all, here in Corinth, anyone who is pro-Paul is by definition anti-Apollos.

And yet Luke seems to be pro-Apollos as well as pro-Paul. Makes you scratch your head, doesn't it, Dimitri? And the things that he's commending about Apollos are precisely his abilities as a powerful speaker, the very things that people say about him at Corinth.

I wonder, therefore, is it possible to be both pro-Paul and pro-Apollos? Isn't that what Luke is saying to his wider readership? Brothers and sisters out there, you'll have all heard about this silly nonsense going on at Corinth.

We've had the Peter group, the Paul group, the Apollos group, and so on. I am commending all three of them to you in my book. Stop this absurd division. They're all different from each other, these three, but they're all men for whom we should be very grateful to God.

[24 : 43] So let's thank God for all of them. Rejoice in the ministry of all of them. They are all a blessing to the churches. Remember what Paul has said about all this in 1 Corinthians chapter 3.

He says, How wrong it is, therefore, to choose to favor one over the other, to be divided over Paul or Apollos or Peter.

Rejoice that you have all of them as your teachers. Now think of us today, because there's an application here. Let us also rejoice that all the true teachers of the Christian faith, those who are alive today and those whose influence continues, even though they've been long dead, let's rejoice that all of these preachers and teachers, let me just name a few.

Augustine. He's dead, isn't he? Back in about 400 and something. Augustine, Wycliffe, Tyndale, Luther, Calvin, John Knox, Wesley, none of these was a perfect teacher, but we can rejoice that all of them have helped us so much by their preaching and their writing and their years of hard labor.

So let's thank God for Luke's little paragraph, his little portrait of Apollos. Yes, Luke is describing the kind of preacher that the churches need, and let's pray for more of these.

[26 : 14] But even more, he's teaching us to receive with joy and real thankfulness the ministry of all who truly study the scriptures and are prepared to refute what is wrong and therefore are able to strengthen and to help the churches.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we thank you so much for Paul, for Apollos, for Peter, for the others who have written the New Testament, for the prophets of the Old Testament, for Moses and all the others who set it down.

And we thank you too for great teachers over the centuries who have helped the church to be molded into the strong understanding that we now have of the gospel. And please help us today to welcome all true teachers of the faith, to love them, to thank you for them, and to accept their words with gratitude as they open up the scriptures to us.

And we pray indeed, dear Father, for the sake of the churches that you will supply us in these coming decades with more and more who are not only able to teach the scriptures well, but who are willing to confront the issues that are so difficult and painful today.

Give us preachers and teachers of courage, we pray, and ability so that the churches may be greatly helped and greatly strengthened. And we ask all these things through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

[27 : 46] Amen. Amen.