

The Travelling Missionary

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[0 : 0 0] Well, friends, good afternoon, and let me say a very warm welcome to the Tron Church for our lunchtime Bible talk this Wednesday. Very good to see you all here. Well, let's turn in our Bibles to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 18, and we're continuing our short series of four studies in this.

This is the third, and we have one more, God willing, next week. We've been following the story of Paul, Paul and his adventures, you might almost say, in this earlier part of Acts, and we're continuing with that today.

Next week, in the final verses of Acts, chapter 18, we'll be thinking about Apollos, who was one of Paul's colleagues, but we're still with Paul today. Our passage for today is verses 18 to 23, but I'll read from verse 5 just to remind us of the larger context of what Paul is doing here in Corinth.

This great and important Greek city. So Acts, chapter 18, beginning at verse 5. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, and that is to say joined Paul in Corinth, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads. I'm innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.

[1 : 2 5] And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household.

And many of the Corinthians, hearing Paul, believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent.

For I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you. For I have many in this city who are my people. And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.

But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint.

[2 : 3 2] But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things. And he drove them from the tribunal.

And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this. 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, that means 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.

[3 : 50] Amen. And may God add his blessing to this, his wonderful word. Well, as I said, our passage for today is verses 18 to 23, the short passage.

And reading a passage like this is a very interesting exercise because it doesn't seem to be saying very much at all. And you have to ask yourself, why did Luke include it?

In last week's passage, verses 5 to 17, we have plenty of action and excitement. We have Paul being opposed and reviled by Jewish people in Corinth.

Then we have this great vision of the Lord Jesus coming to him by night to encourage him, standing by him and saying, don't be afraid. He was obviously under great pressure, but the Lord says, don't be afraid.

Keep on speaking. Don't be silent. Then we have this court scene in front of the Roman proconsul with poor Sosthenes being beaten up. And then we have this little passage in which the most dramatic thing to happen is that Paul gets a haircut.

[4 : 53] At our preacher's training course, the Cornhill course, we regularly get students to preach on a particular passage from the Bible. We give them a few weeks notice to prepare. But if I were to give this passage or passage like this to one of our students, I think he would say to me, please, Edward, don't do this to me.

What have I done to deserve such punishment? However, the more we read the Bible, the more we discover that there is not a single superfluous verse.

It is all the word of God. And even a passage like this, which appears on the surface to have little to offer, has rich treasures below the surface when we start to dig down.

Remember, Luke never wastes a word. And remember this as well, that parchment back in those days was very expensive. You couldn't just...

For us today, we can print out our emails and send off our letters and so on. It only cost us a few pence. But it was very expensive to write in those days. Luke would have had enough information to have written a much longer book than the book that he's left us.

[5 : 55] But he had to write within the constraints of parchment availability and parchment price. And that forced him to trim down his book to the bare essentials. So he wouldn't have included these few verses without a very good reason.

So, eyes down, look in, and let's see what Luke is showing us here. On the level of Paul's work, Paul's activities, this passage functions as a bridge between his work in Corinth and his work in Ephesus.

In the previous chapters, the previous three or four chapters of Acts, Luke has been tracing Paul's missionary journeys from Antioch, where he started off, Antioch in Syria, to Cyprus, his first destination.

Then up through Galatia in modern Turkey, then back to his home church in Antioch in Syria, then down to Jerusalem, where there was the famous Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter 15.

Then he goes back to Turkey. Then he's called across the Aegean Sea into Europe. Remember that great moment when the man of Macedonia appears to him and calls him across, saying, come and help us.

[6 : 59] So he then goes to northern Greece, to Philippi, to Thessalonica, to Berea, then down to Athens in chapter 17, and now finally to Corinth. But in terms of the depth and penetration of his work, Paul's activity in Corinth and Ephesus was the most significant.

He spent far more time evangelizing and teaching in those two cities than he did anywhere else. Approximately two years in Corinth. Have a look at chapter 18, verse 11, and you'll see he stayed there a year and six months.

And then look on to verse 18. After this, after this year and six months, Paul stayed many days longer. So I think we can say approximately two years in Corinth. And then when you read on through chapters 19 and 20, you find that Paul spent three years at Ephesus.

So two at Corinth, three at Ephesus. A long time in Paul's way of life. Why? Well, almost certainly because these were the two most populous and influential cities.

They were great commercial centers, great hubs of communication. Corinth being on the western side of the Aegean Sea and Ephesus on the eastern side. So rather like Glasgow and Edinburgh, the way that those two cities have been for a long time, the two most influential cities in Scotland, where news and views travel furthest and influence makes the greatest impression.

[8 : 23] So Luke, having written of Paul's earlier travels a bit more briefly, now draws his breath and he says to himself, now for the big ones, Corinth and Ephesus.

And our little passage here in verses 18 to 23 describes Paul's route, his journey from Corinth to Ephesus. But it's not straightforward.

Geographically, it's rather complicated. So you'll see that he leaves Corinth in verse 18. And he quickly reaches Ephesus in verse 19. But he only stays there a very short time.

And then he says to the Ephesians in verse 21, a bit like Arnie Schwarzenegger, I'll be back. Then he goes on to Caesarea in verse 22, which was down on the coast of Israel.

Then he goes briefly up to greet the church at Jerusalem. Then he goes to Antioch in Syria, his home church. And then back to Galatia and Phrygia in verse 23.

[9 : 23] So what are we to make of it all? Let me suggest three things. First, let's notice Paul's sheer dogged commitment to the great task that the Lord Jesus has called him to.

I got out my Bible atlas when I was preparing a few days ago. And I turned to Paul's route. And I measured the distances that he covered on this journey. So let me tell you what I found.

It's quite interesting. Verse 18. Just follow it through with me. Verse 18. Paul is accompanied by his new friends, but good friends, Priscilla and Aquila. And he sets out for Syria or sets sail for Syria.

But he doesn't go there directly, not by any means. He calls first at Cancra, which is about as close to Corinth as Port Glasgow is to Glasgow.

In fact, Cancra was the port town on the eastern side of Corinth. And you would go to Cancra to set sail across the Aegean to Ephesus. So the first stage of this journey is five miles.

[10 : 23] Corinth to Cancra. Then he goes by ship across the Aegean to Ephesus. And that second stage would be about 200 miles. Next, in verse 21, he sails from Ephesus to, verse 22, Caesarea.

That third stage, that's quite a long sea journey, about 600 miles. Then he goes up to Jerusalem and greets the church there, the mother church. So stage four is about 65 miles from Caesarea to Jerusalem.

Then he goes to Antioch in verse 22. So that fifth stage would be about 300 miles. Then verse 23, back north, up into Turkey, to Phrygia and Galatia.

And that sixth stage would be about 300 miles. And it's from there, when we get to chapter 19, verse 1, that he finally reaches Ephesus, having traveled inland and overland from central Turkey.

So that final stage would be about 200 miles. Now, I added all that together, being a great mathematician. And it worked out that the total journey comes to something like 17 or 1,800 miles, roughly half of it by sea and half of it over land.

[11 : 34] Now, just think of that. No airplanes, no cars, no trains, just small, rather dangerous wooden sailing ships for the sea part of it and for the land part of it, feet. Something like 800 miles on foot.

Now, what would that have been like for this particular traveler? Was it like taking a pleasant walking holiday in Perthshire during the month of July? Certainly not. Let me read from 2 Corinthians, a short passage here, where Paul is describing some of his adventures.

And experiences as a missionary traveler. Listen to this. Three times I was shipwrecked. And we only read of one of those shipwrecks in Acts 27. Three times I was shipwrecked.

For a night and a day I was adrift at sea. Presumably on a raft or a few planks. On frequent journeys. In danger from rivers.

Danger from robbers. Danger from my own people. That's the Jews. Danger from Gentiles. Danger in the city. Danger in the wilderness. Danger at sea.

[12 : 39] Danger from false brothers. In toil and hardship. Through many a sleepless night. In hunger and thirst. Often without food. In cold. And exposure.

Now that's the real story. Behind these huge journeys. That Paul undertook. They cost him something. And it was all for the sake.

Of getting the gospel. To Gentiles. Like you and me. Now that shows great love. For Gentiles like you and me. But the level of love it shows for Jesus. Is impossible to calculate.

Now remember. Luke holds up Paul. As an example. For other Christians to follow. In some ways of course. We can never follow him. He was an apostle.

And you and I. Are not apostles. He was a traveling missionary. And most of us. Can never do that kind of thing. But. In terms of dogged commitment. To the cause of the gospel.

[13 : 36] We're certainly called upon. To imitate him. Because wherever the gospel. Is effectively communicated. It's the result of the commitment. Of whole churches. It's not just the skills.

Of one or two gifted speakers. And evangelists. It's the whole body of Christians. In local churches. That supports and sustains. The ministry. Of gifted evangelists. Like Paul.

For the work to be fruitful. There has to be a great corporate effort. I mean think of it. There have to be buildings. Like this one. There has to be catering. Serving sandwiches and tea.

That's a very important part of it. Isn't it? There needs to be. To support all that. There needs to be money. And prayer meetings. And hospitality. And love and warmth. Shared. The story of Paul.

When you read it carefully. Is packed with assistant workers. The ordinary church members. Who make the work possible. Think of it. Luke tells us in his gospel.

[14 : 31] About the ministry of Jesus. And he's very pointed about this. At one point in the gospel. Chapter 8 verse 1. He says that Jesus and the apostles. Were supported. By a group of dedicated women.

Who provided for them. Out of their own means. So we mustn't think. That because we don't have the abilities. Of a Paul. We can't be really committed. To the work of evangelism.

We certainly can. All of us together. It's the commitment of the many. That makes possible. The good work of the few. So there's the first thing. Paul's dogged commitment.

To the work. Shown in this. This journeying. And all the suffering involved. We don't have Paul's calling. To be an apostle. But we can all imitate. His devotion.

To the great cause. The terrific cause. The best cause of all. Which is to serve the gospel. Now secondly. Let's notice Paul's concern. For the Jews.

[15 : 25] And this shows itself here. In a rather surprising way. Now here's an easy question. For somebody to answer. Don't all sing out at once. But let's hear from somebody. In the Old Testament. Who went to sleep.

One day. And woke up to find. That his head had been shaved. Anybody. Matthew. No. Samson. That's right. You all knew that. Of course. Samson did.

Now in our passage. Here in verse 18. We read that. At Cancra. Before sailing for Ephesus. Paul had his hair cut. Because. He was under a vow. Now in the Old Testament law.

In the book of Numbers. Vows involving head shaving. Or hair cutting. Were called the vows of a Nazarite. And the word Nazarite. Means someone who is separated to the Lord.

Or consecrated to the Lord. The Nazarite. Takes a vow to abstain from drinking wine. Or eating grapes. Or even the seeds and skins of grapes. And during the period of the vow.

[16 : 21] He or she. Must not have their hair cut. Now in the case of Samson. He was dedicated to the Lord. Lifelong. As a Nazarite. That's why he still had long hair. When he was. Just before he was killed.

Before he died. But normally. These vows would be taken. For a limited period. Then the hair would be cut. And the time of being a Nazarite. Would come to an end. So it seems that Paul here.

Had taken a Nazarite vow. And when he reached Cancra. His time of the vow was up. And so he went to the barbers. It is possible that. In accordance with Nazarite custom.

He was then planning to take the cut off hair. Perhaps in a bag. To the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. And present it to the Lord. As a further act of dedicating himself. To the Lord's service.

But the question is. Why did Paul do this? I mean didn't he teach that Christians were free. From the ritual and ceremonial aspects. Of the law of Moses.

[17 : 18] He taught for example. That a Gentile man. Who became a Christian. Didn't need to be circumcised. And didn't need to keep the food laws. He taught that both Jews and Gentiles.

Who became Christians. Could now eat together. An extraordinary thing. These aspects of his teaching. Were scandalous. To traditionalist Jews. They accused Paul.

Of running a coach and horses. Through the law of Moses. And yet here he is. Taking a Nazarite vow. So what is going on? The answer is surely.

That for the sake of the gospel. Paul is willing. To be subject. To the law of Moses. So that Jewish people. Who observe his behavior. Can see that he greatly respects Moses.

That he doesn't despise the Old Testament law. As he was sometimes accused of. He loves it. Another similar instance of this. Comes in Acts chapter 16. Where Paul.

[18 : 13] Meets the young Timothy. For the first time. And invites him. To join his band of missionaries. And he has Timothy circumcised. So that Jewish people. Would not take offense at Paul. Paul.

Understood more clearly. Than anybody. That Christians are freed. From these ritual observances. But Paul would never insist. On practicing these freedoms. If to practice them.

Put a stumbling block. In the way of Jews. Coming to Christ. He puts it like this. In this famous passage. In 1 Corinthians chapter 9. Though I am free from all.

I have made myself. A servant. To all. That I might win more of them. To the Jews. I became as a Jew. In order to win Jews.

To those under the law. The law of Moses. I became as one. Under the law. Though not being myself. Under the law. That I might win those. Under the law. So this is why.

[19 : 08] Paul takes this. Nazarite vow. And has his haircut. When he's speaking. To Jewish audiences. He wants them. To listen. To his teaching. About Jesus. He wants them.

To hear the gospel. He doesn't want them. To be getting cross with him. Because they perceive him. To be anti-Moses. He loves the Jews. Deeply. As he says. In Romans. Chapters 9 and 10.

I have great sorrow. And unceasing. Anguish for them. In my heart. My heart's desire. And prayer to God. For them. Is that they may be saved. Paul always loved the Jews.

Very deeply. And that's one reason. Why we too. Should love them. And bring the saving gospel. To them. Paul's motto. In Romans. Is to the Jew first. And then to the Greek.

And this is exactly. What he does. In his practice. In the acts of the apostles. It's what he does here. In our passage. At verse 19. You see. He gets to Ephesus. And he heads. Straight for the synagogue.

[20 : 03] And reasons with the Jews there. To the Jew first. Now later in Ephesus. He spent most of his time with Gentiles. But he always went first to the Jews. And the Jews here in Ephesus. They treat him very politely.

Look at verse 20. They invite him to stay longer. So here is Paul. The flexible evangelist. The missionary. Who treats his audiences.

With great respect. To the Jews. I became. As a Jew. In order to win. Jews. So Paul teaches us. To be flexible as well.

And it's one of the great principles. Of cross-cultural missionary work. The gospel itself. And the ethics. That arise from the gospel. Are inflexible.

But the way we present the gospel. Is going to be flexible. Depending on who we're speaking to. To Chinese. To Iranians. To Jews. To Africans. And so on. In the Acts of the Apostles.

[20 : 58] The way that Paul preaches. To the Gentile audiences. That he meets. Is very different. From the way that he preaches to Jews. Well we've seen Paul's commitment. To the work.

His dogged commitment. Secondly. His flexibility. In the work. And now thirdly. Let's see his love. For the churches. In Ephesus.

When he gets here. In verse 19. There's hardly a church yet. In fact. In chapter 19. Verse 1. When Paul gets back to Ephesus. He finds just a little handful of disciples.

Who don't really know much of the gospel. There's not really a church in Ephesus yet. But look at our passage in verses 22. And 23. We see Paul. First of all.

Greeting the church at Jerusalem. Out of love and respect. For the mother church. In verse 22. Then he goes to his home church. At Antioch. Where he spends some time. And then in verse 23.

[21 : 52] We see him revisiting. The churches in Phrygia. And Galatia. Up in central Turkey. Which he had planted. Some two or three years previously. Why? Well we're told at the end of verse 23.

So as to strengthen. All the disciples. So when you think of it. There are really two prongs. Two aspects to Paul's missionary work. First.

First. He evangelizes. And plants churches. Starts from scratch. In various places. But then secondly. He revisits the young churches. So as to strengthen them. In other words.

To teach them further. To correct them. If necessary. And to bring them love. And encouragement. Why? Because he loves them so much. After all. They are his babies.

He wants nothing more. Than to see these baby churches. Growing up. In strength and maturity. Just as we like to see. Our own babies. Or our own grandchildren. Growing up strong and mature. This love for the churches.

[22 : 50] Expressed in Paul's desire. To strengthen them. Is something which is deep. In Paul's DNA. If I can put it like that. And because Paul. Is our great example. Let's seek to have that.

Put deep into our DNA. As well. We need to learn from him. So let me ask this. How do you think. Of the part. That you play. In the congregation.

That you belong to. Let me ask it. Like this. Do you think that your church. Is there for you. Or do you think of yourself. As being there for your church.

Is your attachment. To your church. Something primarily. For your benefit. Or rather. For the church's benefit. It's important. That's important. That we ask that question. I've sometimes heard.

A person say. Oh I stopped going to such and such a church. Because I wasn't getting anything out of it. My question would be. But have you thought of putting something into it?

[23 : 46] It's a strange fact of life. That if our main motivation. In belonging to a church. Is to receive. To receive love and support and care. We're always likely to be dissatisfied.

But if our main motive. Is to give. Love and support and care to others. We shall receive. Ten times more than we need. Remember how Jesus puts it. Give he says.

And it will be given to you. Good measure. Pressed down. Shaken together. Running over. Will be put into your lap. It's simply a fact of life. If our desire is to give.

We shall receive in return. More than enough. But if we're self-concerned. We tend to shrivel up. And become miserable. So let me suggest this. Every time we come out to a church meeting.

Here on a Wednesday. Or other fellowships. Our own fellowship on a Sunday. Prayer meetings and so on. Let's pray just beforehand. Something like this. Lord. I'm going to be with your people now.

[24 : 42] For a couple of hours. Please use me. To give love and strength and support. To somebody who really needs it. Help me to be someone. Who doesn't drain other people.

But rather builds them up. Now of course. All of us. Will go through times of weakness. When we need. Lots of support. And have little energy. To give to others.

I'm well aware of that. Times of bereavement. Illness and perplexity. And of course. We need to receive. More than. More than we can give. At a time like that. Paul himself.

Had times of great difficulty. When he hugely appreciated. The support of other Christians. Christians. But let's make it our aim. To put our life. And our energy. Into our churches.

To be much more concerned. To give strength. Than to receive it. It's the way of blessing. And of course. It's the way that helps our churches. To flourish. Look with me again.

[25 : 34] At the last four words. Of verse 23. Strengthening. All. The disciples. That is a great little phrase. That's Paul. That's Paul.

All over. Because he loved the churches. So much. And that can be us too. As we grow to love. The Lord's people. More deeply. And follow Paul's example. More closely. Strengthening.

All. The disciples. Let's bow our heads. And we'll pray together. We thank you so much.

Dear Heavenly Father. For the example. Of this man. Who did indeed suffer greatly. In the service of the gospel. As he'd been told. Right at the start. That he would do. And yet he experienced.

Such joy. And there was such blessing. And fruitfulness. To his work. Even though it cost him. So dearly. We do pray. Dear Father. That you'll help us. To pick up something.

[26 : 33] Of Paul's spirit. And nature. To look at his example. As he follows the example. Of Jesus himself. So that the family likeness. The image of God. Should be increasingly worked.

Up in our own hearts. And our own experience. So please help us. To strengthen the churches. And to do it with joy. And enthusiasm. We pray. We ask it in Jesus name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.