

**PAUL IN CORINTH**

The cities of Athens and Corinth were as different as chalk and cheese. Athens was a great intellectual and religious centre. Corinth was a commercial and trading centre, lying in a very strategic position on a small neck of land, connecting the two halves of Greece. It was rich and prosperous, with a population of up to 750,000. But Corinth was a by-word for evil and immorality, renowned for its drunkenness, reckless and riotous behaviour, and for prostitution. It's little wonder that Paul was fearful about his mission there.

One would expect that Athens would have been the most fertile ground on which Paul could preach. Yet the reverse is true. In Athens, Paul had argued with the philosophers, with limited affect. He finished his time there with Luke writing, 'some of them sneered, but others wanted to hear more'. Now, in Corinth, he seems determined upon a more direct approach, and ends up staying there a year and a half, founding one of the great churches of the New Testament era.

Later, when he writes to the Corinthians, (1 Cor 2: 1 – 5), Paul describes his first visit by saying that:

- He came speaking in simplicity – the story of the cross
- He came in fear: not for his safety, not because he was ashamed of the gospel, but because he was anxious to perform his duty as an evangelist.
- He came, not with clever arguments, but with spiritual power, not human wisdom, but God's power.

It would appear that as he walked down the coastal road from Athens to Corinth, Paul planned in his mind a new approach to his work. The philosophical approach had not been a great success. How could he better across the basic facts of the faith to a Gentile audience? Upon his arrival, after meeting resistance from the Jews, Paul turned to the Gentiles and received encouragement for his work.

- A number of Corinthians believed and were baptised.
- He had a vision of Jesus. He was reassured that Christ was with him; Christ would protect him from harm; Christ had 'many people' in this city – an inference that Paul had work to do there.
- The attitude of the Roman authorities. Paul is vindicated by Roman law. A riot ensued, but this time, it was not Paul, but the Jewish leader who was beaten up by the crowd. Gallio, the Roman governor, sets an important precedent. He secured the freedom of Christianity under Roman law, and permitted Paul to stay on for a long visit to Corinth.

The Lord's work was being done, and Paul was reassured that it was right for him to stay. It is interesting that his earlier vision had led to his leaving Asia, and crossing the Aegean to Macedonia. Now he was being told to stay put, and preach the gospel in Corinth. Very different messages, yet the same principle: be where God tells you to be.

In Corinth, Paul first meets Priscilla and Aquilla, who are to become life-long friends, who travel with him to Ephesus and appear later in Rome.

In verse 18, Paul leaves Corinth, bound for Syria. It is here that a seemingly strange incident is recorded. Paul has his hair cut off because of a vow that he had made. This is probably a Nazirite vow (see Numbers 6:1, and Judges 13 – the story of Samson). This event offers an interesting insight into Paul's character. This vow represents a self-offering to God. He's just coming to the end of his second mission journey, in which, all along, he has faced opposition from the Jews, and has turned to a Gentile audience. Now we see him doing a most Jewish of things. He takes a vow of holiness, part thanksgiving, part blessing for the future. This shows us that Paul is still a Jew – liberated from the demands of the law, but free to take part in its optional practices. Surely, this is way of demonstrating that his freedom in Christ opens up a variety of ways of offering faith to his hearers. As he says to the Corinthians, 'I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.'

Paul is well received in Ephesus, and seems to get on well with the Jews – perhaps his Nazirite vow gives him a deeper affinity with them.

Then we have an interesting little episode with Apollos. Evidently, Apollos was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures. He came from Alexandria – a place of great learning and literature. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and is depicted as a man with faith. We know that the gospel did spread into Egypt in the very early years of the Christian era. But Apollos' faith was only partial. Although he knew about the baptism of repentance, proclaimed by John the Baptist, he had never encountered the full power of the Holy Spirit. And it took Priscilla and Aquilla to sort him out and lead him to a full confession of faith in Jesus Christ. The consequence of this is that he became a great evangelist, and applied the scriptures to his new found faith in Christ.

Apollos' ministry could never have taken off without the influence of Priscilla and Aquilla, two of the unsung heroes of the story. It reminds us that everybody's contribution is important. When we share our faith, we never know who we may be talking to. Few people have heard of Mordecai Ham, yet it was his ministry which led Billy Graham to faith. It's worth remembering, we could be sharing our faith with the next St. Paul!