

HOME

SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE

By Steve Zeisler

In this message we'll consider a short text in Acts 18 that closes a circle. We began these studies with the departure of missionaries from Antioch. They left on a long adventure, beginning to revisit the places Paul and Barnabas had gone on their first missionary journey, then heading north over long and difficult roads, and finally bringing the gospel to the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth. At the end of these verses Paul will leave Corinth and return at last to Antioch.

Of all the cities the missionaries visited, Corinth was, on one level, the most difficult place to do ministry. It was a wild, aggressive, rich, and self-impressed sort of place. The church founded there was important in its day, but it was also a difficult church that had all the problems of the city. And as we noted in the last message (Discovery Paper 4772), Paul was depleted when he arrived there. "And when I came to you, brethren...I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." (1 Corinthians 2:1a, 3.) He had gone through a great deal of difficulty—imprisonment, a beating, rejection. He had been uncertain of how things would come out, and he worried about the churches he had founded. The work of ministry and hard travel had taken a toll on Paul.

In the midst of his time in Corinth, the Lord Jesus appeared to him. "'Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.' And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." (Acts 18:9-11.) After teaching the word of God faithfully and pastoring this difficult church in a difficult city for eighteen months, abruptly, it seems, Paul decided that it was time for him to leave and return to Antioch. Three years had gone by since he had begun this adventure. Acts 18:18-22:

Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, but taking leave of them and saying, "I will return to you again if God wills," he set sail from Ephesus. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch.

I want to focus on two elements of this short passage: the vow Paul made, and his determination to get to his destination. I hope we can learn from both. We aren't being taught here that we should make vows or take trips. But there are reasons why Paul acted this way, and my hope is that we will see the reasons and find them helpful as we make choices of our own.

Before we consider those elements, let me comment on a couple of details to clarify the picture. The first is that no reason is given for Paul's departure from Corinth. He seems to have left on his own initiative, not because of persecution, a vision from the Lord, or any kind of circumstantial events. His friends didn't say, "Paul, it's time for you to leave." Something inside him gave rise to this event. He traveled with Priscilla and Aquila for part of the distance, but finally he left them and went off on his own. You will recall that the trip he made alone from Athens to Corinth had been heavy and difficult. But in this case, being alone was evidently a good thing. Perhaps he was excited, joyful, anticipating his destination. This trip was fifteen hundred miles long over land and sea. It was no small deal. His stay in Antioch (verse 22) probably lasted three-quarters of a year.

The second detail to observe is there were two cities Paul was determined to get to. It says in verse 22 that when he landed in Caesarea, which was the port city on the Mediterranean Sea nearest to Jerusalem, he went *up* and greeted the church and went *down* to Antioch. What church did he go up to greet and go down from? It was certainly the church in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is at a high elevation, and it is spiritually the highest point in the world for Jews. The verb phrase in the Bible used of travel to Jerusalem is always to go up. The phrase in the Bible for travel from

Jerusalem is always to go down to some other place. So he went to Jerusalem and then finally back to the place where his journey started, Antioch.

Now let's examine the vow Paul makes.

A spiritual discipline

Luke doesn't call a lot of attention to this vow, but it piques our curiosity to read about it, doesn't it? There is very little question that this is a Nazirite vow. It was a voluntary thing. A Jewish believer could, out of gratitude to God or other reasons, take a vow to be subject to this particular way of discipline. Some details are unclear; we don't know why Paul would cut his hair in Cenchrea, or whether he began the Nazirite vow with this haircut and would have one at the conclusion as well.

There are good lessons for us, however, in observing Paul make this vow. A text in Numbers gives us an idea of what it was about.

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the Israelites and say to them: “If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite, he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or from other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins.

““During the entire period of his vow of separation no razor may be used on his head. He must be holy until the period of his separation to the LORD is over; he must let the hair of his head grow long....

““Now this is the law for the Nazirite when the period of separation is over. He is to be brought to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting [or the Temple]....There he is to present his offerings to the LORD....

““Then at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the Nazirite must shave off the hair that he dedicated. He is to take the hair and put it in the fire that is under the sacrifice of the fellowship offering.”” (Numbers 6:1-5, 13-14, 18; NIV.)

A Nazirite vow was voluntary, but it had two requirements: that you would let your hair grow, and that you wouldn't go anywhere near grapes in any form. This was not a difficult assignment, but you had to pay attention to what you were doing. In the Mediterranean Basin in the time of Moses as well as in the time of Paul (and to this day), grapes were everywhere. Grapes in some form or wine were served with almost every meal. Wine vinegar was used as a preservative. As you passed through the countryside you regularly encountered vineyards. So in order to carry out this vow, you couldn't go through the day on autopilot, so to speak. You had to be aware of your circumstances. If you were walking down the road and there was a vineyard alongside it, you might cross to the other side so that you didn't brush up against grapes by accident. If you were served a meal, you would pick through each dish to find out if there were grapes in it and remove them before you ate. You might be in five or six settings throughout the day where you would have to attentively stand back, withdraw, graciously decline, and so on.

The point was that by paying attention to what life brought you, you would be reminded of the Lord. Keeping the vow would give you repeated opportunities in the discipline you undertook to be reminded of the Lord, to attend to him, to thank him, and to ask yourself, “Are my thoughts what they ought to be?”

The way hair grows tells another truth: God changes us slowly. If you look in the mirror today and then look again tomorrow, you won't be able to see much change. But if you look in the mirror today and then come back in six or eight weeks, you will. Slow change takes place. That is really the way God sanctifies us in most cases. He makes changes that we can see only if we observe them over time. That is an aspect of this vow as well.

Evangelicals have been more alert to the issues of spiritual discipline in the last fifteen or twenty years than they were for many decades before. There are many books written about spiritual disciplines, about undertaking a withdrawal or putting oneself in a restriction of some kind for the sake of the Lord. They are very helpful, and I commend them to you. This is an important way that we can relate to God, and we have much to learn from this literature. Paul's example in this text is an encouragement to turn in that direction.

The kind of spiritual disciplines we encounter in this text are not, however, a battle with sin. There are other kinds of restrictions that we undertake because some things are wrong in themselves. For example, we do battle with our tendencies to be greedy and lustful, to gossip, to be jealous, and so on. We are told to put to death the things of the flesh and to be raised again with Christ, to put off the old self and put on the new (Colossians 3:1-10). But that is not in view here. Grapes are not a bad thing. Of all the kinds of produce on the earth, grapes are some of the most honorable in the Bible, as a matter of fact. The discipline of fasting doesn't mean there is anything wrong with food. We might choose solitude as a spiritual discipline, pull away from our friends and spend time in silence, not because there is anything wrong with our friends, or we should always be quiet. Fellowship and speech are good things. But we make a choice to withdraw from them because we want the opportunity to give the Lord first place, to hear his voice, to turn away from other calls for our time and attention.

Paul was at a time in his life when he had poured himself out, given away the life of Christ to others every day without a break for three years. Now he said, "Lord, I want time with you. I want to give attention to you." As a Jew, he chose the Nazirite vow as a way of accomplishing this.

I tried to think of some examples that might be useful in a culture like ours, and most of them are electronic. Most of us don't regularly see growing plants made into food, and we often eat without having any idea what is in our food. But we are surrounded by electronics. It struck me that one thing that might be similar to a Nazirite vow in my own case is to keep the car radio off. I don't like silence. But that would probably be a good choice for me, because I am in the car enough that I would be reminded often, "It's quiet in here—that means that I have chosen a restriction that will give me the chance to be grateful, to sing a hymn, to offer a prayer." Saying no offers an opportunity to say yes to the Lord. Similar choices might be turning off cell phones, or restricting how much news you have at your fingertips. There are many ways to enter into a discipline that gives you a chance to recognize and appreciate the daily presence of the Lord.

Now let's examine Paul's determination to go to the cities of Jerusalem and Antioch.

Going home

We know Paul was determined to do this because when he got to Ephesus, for the first time in his experience as an apostle, he went into a synagogue, and they wanted him there. "Stay, teach us—we want to believe!" There was a wide-open door for ministry in Ephesus. The missionaries had had to pass by that region when they were coming north on the journey; now there was a chance to stay, the very thing he had longed to do. But Paul said, "No, I won't stay now. I'll come back later." And he does come back to Ephesus eventually. But now he had other priorities: Jerusalem and Antioch.

What did these cities represent for him? Each was a home of sorts, a place that resonated deeply with him. Paul's first prayers were surely the Psalms of the Jewish Bible. His first encounter with the holiness of God was surely in the sacrifices of the temple. His first hearing of the righteousness of God was in the commandments of the Pentateuch. His first instruction that the world was filled with the glory of the Lord came in Judaism. For Paul, to go back to Jerusalem was to go back to the place where God had first made himself known to him. Judaism didn't save Paul; in fact, it eventually corrupted him. But the Lord he met there was the living God. The prayers that Paul prayed there were prayers that were written by men of faith. What Paul was reminding himself was, "I am not at the core defined by the things I do. I am at the core defined by a relationship with the God of the ages."

I do more memorial services than I used to. As I've met with people when someone has died, it has struck me increasingly that the majority of folks who gather for a memorial service don't know who they are. They don't even know how to ask questions of their soul: "What do I believe? Where am I going?" They haven't been formed by any great truths. That hour that we meet for a memorial service is one of the few times when death and God and eternity and heaven and hell are all in view. Our world aggressively takes that from us. But Paul was determined not to let his ministry or anything else loom so large. He was going back to Jerusalem to greet the church, but also to be on his knees before the God he first met there.

He went to Antioch for a similar reason. Antioch was the place where Paul became an apostle in practice. He had been called by Christ before that, but in Antioch for the first time a group of elders in a church laid hands on him and said, "By the Spirit of God you are called to this ministry." Antioch was the place where Paul's Christian leadership

was first established and his life's calling made plain. The saints in Antioch were a strong foundation for Paul. He was going back to that place as a home, to be embraced and built up, as well as to report on his ministry.

Paul needed this for the same reason that everybody needs times like this. Many folks in our congregation have been on the road too long—three, five, eight, fifteen years since they last looked hard at what they believed the most and loved the most, said no to some things and went somewhere where their attention was given to Christ alone. There are too many among us who don't even remember for sure and can't articulate completely what it is that they believe, how they started this journey with God, what truths mattered most to them then and need to matter most to them now about who God is and who they are.

Paul's journey home to Jerusalem and Antioch was in both cases a recognition that he couldn't go on forever without replenishing his spiritual life, without drinking deeply from the well of the truest things. He set an example for us, both in committing himself to a daily series of reminders that God was present and he could give thanks to him, and in returning to deep roots. And we will do well to sometimes go back home to the place where God has met us, where the people of God will support us, listen, and be part of the good renewal of our hearts.

At the end of the second missionary journey, having gone out in service and ministry, Paul ended by going back to a place where he could receive from the Lord. Both are foundational to the Christian life.

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