



series: [The Great Adventure](#)
previous message: [Home](#)

formats: [mp3](#)

START SPREADIN' THE NEWS

SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE

By Steve Zeisler

We're resuming our study of the book of Acts, and we've come to chapter 18, which is the start of Paul's third missionary journey. Acts is the missions book of the Bible, the story of those who first took the gospel to new places and different cultures, planted churches, dealt with resistance, and gave the church an enduring pattern of discipleship.

I did some traveling when I was on sabbatical last summer, and I visited about a dozen churches in different places. I found a consistent characteristic among them: all were making efforts to identify what made them stand out. It is good to identify and celebrate what God is doing in a congregation, but a word of caution is necessary. An inward focus can reduce our witness to the unbelieving world around us.

The book of Acts is a great place in Scripture to rekindle enthusiasm for witnessing, for touching the lives of those who are living apart from Christ, for giving away what we've been given.

In Acts, Luke (the author) gives attention to cities and regions, beginning with Jerusalem. Ephesus is the destination of Paul's third journey.

Acts 18:23-19:10:

After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?"

"John's baptism," they replied.

Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

We’re going to divide our study into two parts. The first part will focus on Paul, about whom there is a coherent story told at the beginning and at the end of this passage. In the middle, however, are two accounts that center on the witness of John the Baptist. These stories are odd, incomplete, provocative. In the second part of our study we’ll see what we can learn from the story of Apollos and the twelve disciples who were baptized with John’s baptism.

The ministry of Paul: persuading and strengthening

You may recall the events preceding Paul’s actions in this passage. In 18:19b-21 he was traveling to Jerusalem to worship there. He needed some spiritual refreshment, encouragement of his own heart. On the way, traveling with his friends Priscilla and Aquila, he came to Ephesus.

“He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, ‘I will come back if it is God’s will.’ Then he set sail from Ephesus.”

In Ephesus Paul had the unusual experience of being asked to continue teaching in a synagogue. He recognized that this opportunity was from the Lord and said in effect, “I believe this is where I am called to come next. I give you my word that apart from some intervention from God, I will come back.”

We’re told in 19:1 that Paul does return to Ephesus, and in 19:8 we pick up the thread: “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”

There are four things we can observe in Paul’s ministry in this text. The first is in 18:23: “After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.” He doesn’t go directly to Ephesus. There are other Christians who need strengthening. Galatia and Phrygia are places where he has founded churches. These are struggling young congregations with young leadership, trying to make their way faithfully. They need encouragement. We should share a similar concern for churches in our time that face great difficulties with few resources.

One of the things I did last summer when I was traveling was visit Doug and Candy Goins in Phoenix, Arizona. Doug, of course, was a pastor here at PBC for many years. Now he and Candy have joined a missions organization called Paraclete, which sends out well-established Christian leaders to various places in the world where missionaries and young churches are struggling, where a word of encouragement is needed. Doug and Candy are excited about the opportunity to do this ministry, and we can partner with them. What a great work! It is very much the same pattern Paul had, and we can learn from it.

A second observation we can make is from 19:8: “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.” Boldness and reasonable persuasion are difficult to hold together. The people I know who are most thoughtful about their faith are not usually bold. The reverse is also true: folks who are naturally bold and forthright too often avoid the work of listening and persuading.

But what Paul does when he enters the synagogue is act with boldness and courage, stepping into the opportunities, looking for openings, and at the same time he persuades them, answers questions, makes his case in a reasonable way. We can challenge ourselves in this: Are we as bold as we ought to be? Are we thoughtful? And what about those we support who take the gospel to new places? How can we build up their courage and help them understand how to explain the faith persuasively?

A third observation about Paul’s ministry is from 19:9: “But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.” His preaching brings the issue to a point. Eventually people say yes or no. Those who reject the message become obstinate and resist. Paul’s message calls for a response; the discussion does not go on forever. There are religious councils that exist only to exist. There are organizations whose mission is to discuss things forever. But Jesus is Lord, not the leader of a seminar.

The last thing I would mention about Paul’s ministry is the training school at the hall of Tyrannus. Some who hear the gospel believe it, love the Lord Jesus who died for them, and give their lives to him. So Paul starts a school where Christian instruction can take place for these young believers. For two years he teaches classes every day on how to live in the Spirit, how to discover one’s spiritual gifts, how to deal with the enemy, how to integrate faith into daily life, how to have a Christian home, and so on. Then those who are taught fan out to the regions around. It says in verse 10 that everybody in the province of Asia hears the word of the Lord—not in the preaching of Paul, but because those who are trained by him go home and begin to share the truth about Jesus. He has a commitment to training, to giving away ministry, to believing in people so that they can become leaders and servants themselves. He wants the next generation to succeed.

Now let’s turn to the passages that mention John the Baptist.

Sharing the rest of the story

The first account is of Apollos, and the second is of a circle of twelve students, who apparently gather together in some sort of home group. There is no mention of a synagogue in their case, and they don’t seem to have come in contact with Priscilla and Aquila. They are uninformed. In both the case of Apollos and the case of these followers of John the Baptist, language is used that suggests faith, and yet uncertainty is introduced as well. Are these people Christians or not? If they’re not, what are they? What does John’s teaching include? Perhaps the ambiguity itself is meant to teach us something. I’ll make some observations about these two accounts and then we’ll look at some applications to our own experience.

John the Baptist was the first prophet in Israel in almost four hundred years. During that time there had been some terrible periods in Jewish history, with the rise of the Greek Empire and the coming of the Romans. Finally, this odd, Elijah-like figure came, living in the wilderness and eating locusts and honey. He preached out in the desert, calling for repentance. His was the voice of God. All of Judea went out to hear him (Matthew 3:5; Mark 1:5). He was an extraordinary figure. His enemies and his followers alike agreed he was a prophet. The long-awaited Messiah that they had hoped for was at their door! The world was about to change.

John’s followers spread out. Some went to Alexandria, apparently, where Apollos heard this message of John’s. Some of them went to Ephesus. Those who believed John’s message lived in anticipation of Messiah’s arrival without knowing the news about Jesus.

Apollos, in particular, is a gifted Bible student, Luke says. He is passionate about God. Presumably he has gone back into the Old Testament and found considerable instruction about the One to come. He can teach a great deal about the Messiah just by looking at the prophetic word. So Apollos is teaching accurately, but he doesn't know the end of the story.

The twelve followers of John who huddle together in Ephesus haven't yet heard that in Jesus' victory over death, he offers the Spirit of God to take up residence in their lives. But they're hoping and waiting. They believe everything they know; it's just that nobody has told them the rest of the story.

Why are these two accounts here? What are we supposed to learn from them? They suggest one very important thing to me: that there are still folks like this in the world today. They want to believe. They don't need to be *confronted* with the claims of Christ. They don't need to be challenged with the power of God. They don't need to be called to account. They just need someone to sit down with them and tell them what they haven't heard yet. They believe as much as they know; they just don't know all they need to know.

Priscilla and Aquila take Apollos aside, probably in their home. They sit down with him, listen to him, engage him, and say, "Do you know who came after John? Jesus of Nazareth. And here's how he won the victory...." You can imagine Apollos breaking into tears: "I've given my life to telling people he's coming, and now I know that he has come! Thank you!"

These twelve who want to know what God is going to do and how it's going to happen are finally given the opportunity to know! Paul lays hands on them, the Spirit comes, and they're enveloped into the community.

Seeking the lost

Somebody in your life has a garbled version of what it means to be a Christian. They believe every true thing they know, but they've got so much foolishness wrapped around it, they don't know how to find their way out. They love as much of God as they've seen, but they don't know how to find him as he is. We should approach such folks not with challenge but with encouragement: "Let me tell you the end of the story. Let me tell you how it turns out. Let me clear away some of the religious tangle and clutter you have accumulated."

I was doing premarital counseling with a couple some time ago. The man had been raised a Catholic, but had gotten divorced, and from his version of Catholicism, he now felt completely rejected, unworthy of God or the church. In time he fell in love with another woman, and they wanted to know if I would marry them. We proceeded to some premarital discussion. I was talking about having a Christ-centered home, what it means to pray together as a couple, and how to trust God so that your marriage can be what it ought to be. Every time I would say something, he would say, "That's great!" or, "I've always believed that!" But he had imagined himself sacramentally or ritually cut off from God, so that even though all these truths were in his heart, he couldn't act on them.

Finally I asked him, "Why don't you think you're a Christian, then?"

He replied, "I'm not permitted."

I was able to tell him, "Yes, you are. Let me tell you the part that you haven't heard." I showed him in the pages of Scripture that he was loved, forgiven, and welcomed by the Lord. And it was a revolution for him.

Christmas time awakens longings in people who have an ache for God. They hear great Christmas carols, and yet the baby Jesus and Santa Claus are sort of wrapped up together, and they don't know how to sort it out. They never got any clear version of it. They know something holy happens every year, but they don't know how to get in on it. If only somebody would take the time to tell them!

Every Christian I know wants to spend their life as close to Jesus as they can be. You will be the close

companion of Jesus when you meet with other Christians for worship. He's there. You'll be the close companion of Jesus when you pray and open the Scriptures alone. You'll realize he's there. You may go off into the wilderness for a time of intentional focus on the Lord, and he'll be there. But I'll tell you one other place he'll be: he'll be there when you go to the people who don't yet know for sure that he loves them, when you take a risk to care about those who are still outside the faith, when you show love to those who don't quite understand it yet, even when you don't know how they're going to respond. When you give away what you've been given, Jesus is there, too.

Do you remember the story of Zaccheus? The self-righteous grumbled because Jesus said he was going to Zaccheus' house for dinner. "He's a sinner, a wicked man! He doesn't belong." Jesus replied, "The Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). So if we want to be the close companion of Jesus, we will go to those who are lost, because he is there.

C.T. Studd, the great nineteenth-century missionary, penned this couplet:

"Some like to dwell within the sound of church or chapel bell—

I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell."

If that's where you want to be, Jesus will be your companion, rescuing folks however and wherever the opportunity arises.

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