Material from Acts 18 segue to Acts 20

I left you last session with Paul in Corinth. It appears that Paul must have assumed that the church at Corinth was pretty stable as he leaves it along with Priscilla and Aquila (notice the atypical order of their names that I suggested last time may have been due to Priscilla being of a higher social class than her husband—even though the letters to the church(es) at Corinth, written shortly after he left, seem to indicate that he was somewhat overly optimistic [Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Book 5: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012), p. 1349.]. Others believe that the emphasis on Paul’s stay in Corinth was to demonstrate that the vision of Paul’s safety had been authentic and that he was not forced out of town by legal machinations [Munck, Johannes, *The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1967), p. 180.].

***18After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers[***[***c***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2018&version=ESV#fen-ESV-27562c)***] and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.***

Cenchrae was the major harbor for Corinth. It was important for maritime trade, not only to Corinth but for the ships to cross the isthmus before the canal was built. The canal was started under the reign of Emperor Nero (ca. AD 67) with 6,000 slaves digging with shovels, but wasn’t operational until the very late 19th century. So, during Paul’s time, boats could take the 300 kilometer long way around or cross via the Diolkos, a stone “railway” which was lined with grooved logs so that boats could be pushed along the road across the isthmus. Cenchrae was around 4.5K in population around Paul’s time. There is no record of Paul establishing a church here, but since Phoebe in Romans 16:1 (the deaconess?) is from Cenchrae, there must have been a church [Du Veill, Carolus Maria, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. Haddon, 1851), p. 398.]. That should remind us that God was causing the expansion of the church, not just Paul and his companions.

The Greek is ambiguous regarding who cut off their hair at Cenchrae [Munck, p. 180, n. xviii.18; Smith, T. C., “Acts” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 10: Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 110.] It may have been Aquila, since he is the last one mentioned before the preposition “he” and follows his wife in the introduction [Gloag, Paton J., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Volume II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 178.].

The big question, though, is whether was this a Nazirite vow (Num 6:1–21)? Many scholars assume so [F. F. Bruce says “perhaps” in Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original 1954), p. 377.], but others think it might simply have been a local, legal vow of some sort [Du Veill, p. 398]. They argue that there is no indication of the purpose of a Nazirite vow and that following a Jewish ritual would have been counter to Paul’s emphasis on freedom from the law. Personally, I think that’s a ridiculous line of argument, as one of my older commentaries notes: “Although this vow was not precisely the same as the Nazarite vow, yet it was a modification of it, practised by those Jews who were abroad, and who were necessarily prevented from strictly observing the conditions of the law." This vow was probably an expression of gratitude on the part of the apostle for the divine goodness in preserving him from imminent danger during his long abode at Corinth.” [Gloag, p. 180.]. In addition, it could be: “Paul wanted to demonstrate his “willingness to follow the Torah in matters of personal spiritual discipline” and thus his “good faith” to the conservative Jewish Christians in Antioch and in Jerusalem, hoping that this gesture “would heal any continuing rift.” [Schnabel, p. 1352.]

Let’s look at Numbers 6 and see how these vows were supposed to go:

* **Idea of separation TO the LORD (v. 2)**
* **Idea of separation from wine/strong drink and even grapes/vinegar (vv. 3-4)**
* **Idea of distinctiveness through not shaving/cutting hair (v. 5)**
* **Separation from dead bodies (v. 6)**
* **Concludes with burnt offering, sin offering, and peace offering (vv. 13-17)**
* **Shave at the door of the tabernacle and burn hair in the fire for the peace offering (v. 18)**

**19**And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. **20**When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. **21**But on taking leave of them he said, “I will return to you if God wills,” and he set sail from Ephesus. According to many sources, there was significant traffic between Corinth/Cenchrae and Ephesus at this time [Gloag, p. 180.].

Once Paul gets to Ephesus, he leaves Priscilla and Aquila. I’m not sure that he abandoned them. It seems more like he decided to focus on ministering in the synagogue rather than being a part-time missionary in a tentmaking partnership with the couple. I find I’m not the only one with this idea [Munck, p. 180, n. 19-23.]. It may be that Paul simply didn’t want to impinge on Priscilla and Aquila for hospitality as he awaited the ship ready to sail for Syria (and Antioch). We do know, however, “The Jewish couple evidently own a house in Ephesus, the location of a future house church (1 Cor 16:19).” [Schnabel, p. 1353].

Also, as some of you have noted during the section on Athens, the Greek verb that is usually translated as “argued” or “debated” in the Chinese translations is διελεχθη (pronounced “dee-eh-lehk-thee”) from which we get our English words “dialect,” “dialectic,” and “dialogue.” This is not to be understood as something disruptive, hence many translate it as “reasoned.” [Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume III: The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 304.]. This is typical of Hebrew culture when studying the scriptures. When Wailam and I were in Old Jerusalem, we saw men in a separate room outside the tomb of David. They were in loud dialogue, excited dialogue as they searched the scriptures. That’s what Paul was doing in the synagogue. Indeed, “They were apparently interested in what he had to say because Paul received an invitation from them to stay.” [Smith, p. 108.] That doesn’t seem like he was being hostile or obnoxious to them. Note also that Paul wasn’t ministering in the flesh because he promised to return to them IF God willed so. Of course, we know from Acts 19 that he does return.

Luke sends Paul to complete this missionary journey by reporting to the sending church in Antioch (some believe he went on to Jerusalem, as well [Schnabel, p. 1353.]. Then, Luke gives us a preview of the fact that Paul is going to return through the center of Turkey to reinforce the churches established on earlier missionary trips. “The journey from Antioch, the capital of Syria, to Ephesus, the capital of Asia Minor, was about 800 miles (1,300 km.), requiring nine weeks of walking if we assume one day of rest per week.” [Schnabel, p. 1377.] Of course, if he spent a few days ministering in each church, it would have taken much longer.

But there’s more to the transition than this. There is the Apollos situation. *24Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. 25He 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. 26He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. 27And 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, 28for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.*

The significance here was that this new compatriot was from Alexandria, famous for its library (which unfortunately burned down) and, during this period, “At this period there was a celebrated school of Jewish learning, the school of Philo, which in freedom from mere form, liberty of thought, and spirituality, was in advance of the age; and which, though tainted with mysticism in its doctrine of the Logos, approached nearest the truth of the gospel.” [Gloag, p. 185.] And, in particular, Apollos is described as λογιος (pronounced “LOH-gee-ohs” or “lah-gee-ahs”) which can mean eloquent, as in full of words, learned (since this is an important root in philosophy like the Logos of the Word), or, according to some Greek sources, “skillful in history.” [Du Veill, Carolus Maria, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. Haddon, 1851), p. 402.].

Most likely, this word meant that he was skillful in rhetoric, the ability to style arguments and information orally so as to convince an audience. It was a major part of both Greek and Latin curricula so a person who was a good orator would have been considered learned. More importantly, Apollos used his rhetorical ability to be powerful/capable in interpreting the scriptures. There are also two different readings of “the way” in various texts. Verse 24 speaks of the “Way of the Lord,” suggesting the way of using the scriptures to preach repentance as in John the Baptist’s teaching. Verse 25 reads “Way of the Lord” again, but more reliable texts read the “Way of Jesus.” [Gloag, p. 183, n. Ver. 25.] The English Standard Version that I read from earlier uses Jesus. But we know from what comes later that he didn’t have full knowledge.

So, if he was “fervent in the Spirit” and taught “accurately” about Jesus, what did Priscilla and Aquila have to teach him and why didn’t the new converts in Ephesus have the full realization of the Holy Spirit? My take on this is that he taught accurately as far as it goes and as far as he knew, but with an energy and conviction that he was advancing God’s glory [Du Veill, p. 402.]. He built a solid foundation for evangelism, but more was needed for discipleship. 1 Corinthians 3:6 makes it clear that there are ministers who are good at establishing basics and ministers who are better at challenging believers to grow in the Spirit. Apollos “watering” in 1 Corinthians (since he goes back to Corinth later in our text) suggests sustenance for spiritual growth.

The ambiguity present here is explained very well by Dr. Schnabel: “But note that, unlike the ‘disciples’ of 19:1–7, Apollos is not baptized ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus’ (cf. 19:5), a fact that suggests he was thought to have saving faith in Jesus. Whenever Apollos was immersed by John or one of John’s disciples (cf. Luke 3:3), after repentance and reception of forgiveness of sins, he had accepted John’s witness about the Coming One, who would ‘immerse’ people in the Spirit as promised by the prophets; he had recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior of Israel; and he evidently received the gift of God’s Spirit (he was ‘fervent in the Spirit’) and taught about Jesus accurately.” [Schnabel, pp. 1380-1381.].

I think the takeaway here is that no matter how eloquent or educated we may be, no matter how much we think we know about the scriptures, we can be challenged, enlightened, and inspired by our sisters and brothers in Christ. Note also, that it wasn’t seminary-trained professionals that corrected and developed Apollos to go back to Corinth and build the church there. Rather, they were tradespeople, tentmakers. Don’t ever doubt the ministry of lay persons.

Again, notice that his ministry in Corinth included powerful dialogue. The verb translated “refuted” or “confuted” is a compound verb based on the verb for dialogue that we have seen earlier. The preposition for “down” has been inserted into the word, so: “this double compound which means to argue down to a finish. It is the imperfect tense and does not mean that Apollos convinced these rabbis, but he had the last word.” [Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume III: The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 309.]. We would assume from what Paul writes later in the letters to the Corinthians and from the phrase in verse 27 that he “greatly helped them” that Apollos ministered in the church, as well, but he, like Paul, still wanted to win the Jews.

Acts 19

Luke doesn’t give us much detail as we transition from Apollos’ ministry to Paul’s Third Missionary Journey. However, we know from Acts 18:23 that he revisited some of the previous churches. But as you can see from the map, he moved rather quickly to Ephesus. As noted, when we started this session, the trip summarized here would have taken a minimum of nine (9) weeks without spending time teaching in each church. Regardless, Paul finally ends up in the capitol of Asia Minor at that time, Ephesus. Throughout the Roman Empire, Ephesus had the right of “first landing.” That meant that anything official from the empire would be proclaimed in Ephesus first. Indeed, even written messages would be carried from Ephesus outward (witness the messages to the seven churches in Revelation). It was also a “free Greek city” so that it had its own government [Bruce, p. 378.]

Not only was it politically significant as represented by the small amphitheater (“bouleterion”) pictured on the slides and used for government business for the city and province, but it had, at that time, a harbor for maritime trade. The image depicted on the slide for Trade by Land and Sea shows where the harbor was, as well as the large commercial forum, handy to both deliveries from the harbor and from nearby land routes. Ironically, the harbor was dredged by funds secured from the Temple of Artemis—of which we’ll hear much later. Some suggest that the decline of the temple/shrine as a result of the success of Christianity may have doomed the harbor.

The worship of Artemis Ephesia was the dominant cult of the city, the shrine’s remains are pictured on the right slide of my slide. The statue featuring what people used to think were breasts, and which some think is just representative of removable clothing, are most likely bull testicles. Traditionally connected with hunting, Artemis’s central function was connected with female (and also male) initiation, which turned girls into women, and with childbirth. She was worshiped privately as a helper in need and addressed in magical papyri [Schnabel, p. 1378).]. Magical words with no particular meaning were inscribed on the pedestal where the statue rested, as well as on magical papyri, plates, and wherever—these words are known as the *Ephesia Grammata*.

Anyway, we know that Paul remained in Ephesus approximately three years: three months in 19:8, two years in 19:10, three years of 20:31 [Brown, Raymond E., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Bantam, Doubleday, Anchor, 1997), p. 312, n. 79.]. It is probably the venue from which Paul wrote Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Corinthians. Did having a stable “missionary base” from which to work change his “missionary style?” Or maybe, God just put him in a place of maximum influence and had him stay until dramatic circumstances indicated his work there was done? Regardless of the exact amount of time he spent there: “The refrain that ‘the word of the Lord grew’ (Acts 19:20, cf. 6:7, 12:24) signals that alongside Jerusalem and Antioch, Christianity now has another major center, Ephesus, and that Paul’s ministry has been blessed even as was the ministry of the Twelve.” [Brown, p. 312.]

When Paul gets there, his first encounter is with unidentified believers. Some simply assume that these were Apollos’ converts before he was instructed by Priscilla and Aquila, while others think that they may have been dislocated Jewish disciples who had been baptized by John [Schnabel, p. 1384.]. The problem with the first idea is that there is no grammatical clue to suggest a connection with Apollos [Robertson, p. xxx.]. And, while the message seems to trace back to John the Baptizer, these could be converts from anywhere in the empire who had come to Ephesus as a major Roman city [Du Veill, p. 404.].

1And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. **2**And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” **3**And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John's baptism.” **4**And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” **5**On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. **6**And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. **7**There were about twelve men in all.

My position is that they were likely people who had heard John’s message to repent because the Christ had come, but they didn’t have a complete idea of what discipleship would mean or that God provided spiritual resources through the Holy Spirit. In short, they would have been “incomplete” or “fringe” Christians [Schnabel, p. 1385.]. This idea is enhanced by the rather careless answer to Paul’s question that they hadn’t even discovered that there was a Holy Spirit.

Now, this is important. There are charismatics who use this passage to suggest that the Holy Spirit baptism is a separate event in the believer’s life. But pay attention to this grammatical clue in verse 2: “The aorist form of both verbs intimates that both actions, believing and the reception of the Holy Ghost, were regarded as simultaneous. There is no question as to what happened after believing, but the question is about what occurred when they believed. Hence the clause is not to be rendered, as in our version, ‘Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?’ but, ‘Did you receive Him on believing?’” [Gloag, p. 195.] Robertson comments on the amazing ignorance of these disciples, suggesting that they understood John’s message quite poorly [Robertson, p. 311.].

“Paul’s question addresses the point of what it means to be a Christian: a genuine believer in Jesus is not someone who is immersed with the correct formula, but who has faith combined with the Holy Spirit, whose presence is evident in their lives (whether through prophetic manifestations or through transformed behavior).” [Schnabel, p. 1386.].

Notice the very tense of the Greek and the response to the question makes it clear that the expectation was for believer’s baptism and the outward working of the Holy Spirit to be tied together, as Schnabel says, simultaneously. So, when Paul tries to diagnose what is wrong in their relationship, it is because they didn’t even know it was important. As Jews and as followers of the Baptizer, they would have heard of the Holy Spirit, but we should realize that the standard Old Testament idea of the Holy Spirit was that God came upon individuals at need with the phrase, “And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him.” It happened for Samson in both the lion-killing account (Judges 14:6) and happened to many of the judges before victories were won. Isaiah specifically stated that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him before he prophesied (Isaiah 61:1, cited by Jesus), as did Ezekiel (Ezekiel 11:5). In Ezekiel 37:1, the hand of the Lord is on the prophet and the Spirit of the Lord brings him out to the valley of dry bones.

So, to one familiar with the Old Testament, but not Jesus’ promise of the Paraclete, Comforter, indwelling Holy Spirit, the idea of the constant presence of God through the Holy Spirit would have been foreign to them. Yet, John’s gospel of repentance and the Messiah’s coming was sufficient enough that Paul could instruct them in verse 4 and make connections. In fact, note the phrase equating the one who would come after him [after John] with Jesus. “This is John's identical phrase, "the one coming after me" as seen in Mark 1:7; Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:15.” [Robertson, p. xxx.].

Now, they are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus and receive affirmation by Paul’s laying on of hands. Then, we immediately observe two outward signs of the legitimate following of God: speaking in tongues and prophesying. This is very similar to what we saw with the Samaritans in Acts 8:17 [Smith, p. 110.] The immediate question that may be asked by your students is, “Why did they speak in tongues as a normal expression of the Holy Spirit then, but we only expect it in charismatic churches today?”

Remember that speaking in tongues that were not learned was a mark of the Holy Spirit’s influence on the disciples at Pentecost, a proof of God’s working among the Samaritan believers in Acts 8, and a sign that Cornelius and company’s belief was authentic in Acts 10 [Du Veill, p. 407; Schnabel, p. 1388.] They needed an immediate sign and this was provided in these manifestations. As we look at the scriptures from our perspective in history, the Bible assures us of the indwelling Holy Spirit so we don’t “require” an external sign of that type.

Please don’t tar and feather me because I’m not trying to advocate that we become a charismatic church. However, I believe that there may be times in an individual’s life, in their prayer closet, where God may give them a sign where they might speak what they don’t know as an assurance. There are, of course, other ways than these that the Holy Spirit is demonstrated. For example, when I was in Belarus, my Russian was very limited. I could understand a little but my translator would sit next to me during most services and whisper a translation to me so that I didn’t get lost. But one Sunday, he was preaching and I didn’t have a translator. After the service, he asked if I got anything out of it. I started describing in some detail and he said, “Hmm! You must know more Russian than I thought.” I didn’t, but the Holy Spirit clued me in to what was important.

More importantly, as even Paul writes in a later letter, is the gift of prophecy. They didn’t just do the dramatic tongue-speaking, but they did the very basic and necessary task of building each other up and challenging each other to grow that is part of prophecy. That should be an example for us to prioritize. It isn’t the visible and dramatic that we’re supposed to focus on; it’s the faithful sharing and teaching of God’s Word that should be the daily exercise of the Holy Spirit.

By the way, does anyone else find it interesting that there were *twelve* of these naïve, incomplete, uninformed disciples? Is that symbolic of the 12 tribes and 12 apostles? Is it a way of suggesting a new beginning? It certainly isn’t overt, but it is probably implied by emphasizing the symbolic number 12.

In verse 8, Paul returns to his usual approach of preaching in the synagogue. The word often translated as “boldly” can mean both confidently and openly. The word suggests that Paul was welcomed to participate in the dialogue we’ve talked about in other passages. Robertson observes that we have no other passage where Paul was able to preach in the synagogue without being interrupted (with the possible exception of at Corinth) [Robertson, p. xxx.].

Of course, we also read that certain Jews were not only unresponsive, but hostile in verse 9. They not only don’t believe (idea of not being persuaded) but they are disobedient. They reject the gospel and slander those who believe and follow the way.

So, Paul separates himself from the synagogue and takes people with him to the lecture hall (word from which we get “school”) of Tyrannus. On the slide, I have a painting of Paul preaching in the School or Guild Hall of Tyrannus and, since we don’t know which of the ruined buildings in Ephesus was that hall, I picked a street leading to a public building to illustrate it. I once preached at a Baptist church called Tyrannus Baptist Church. Strange name, huh? Sounds like tyrant, but it was based on the name of an apparent philosopher. Perhaps, it is a nickname “because that by the force of his eloquence, he thrusted down and lifted up his hearers." [Du Veill, p. 408.].

Paul dialogues with them for two years and possibly more. Some think that Paul’s strategy was to gradually convince the curious who attended his lecture-dialogues that Jesus was the Messiah [Smith, p. 110.]. At the end, v. 10 tells us that “all Asia” had heard the gospel. This might seem to be hyperbole, but it is more likely the idea of how significant Ephesus was as the capitol of the province of Asia and how much influence its culture and events had on those surrounding the city [Gloag, p. 200.]. It was probably also tied to the miracles worked in verses 11-12. Imagine that even handkerchiefs or aprons (such as those worn by craftspersons) that were one step removed from Paul’s skin were associated with healing power.

Of course, wherever that kind of power is demonstrated, there are going to be unscrupulous imitators trying to take advantage of it. The noun for “exorcists” is only used this one time in the New Testament [Robertson, p. 317.]. There is a reason for that. Exorcism originally referred to the removal of demons using magical formulae. The deliverance from evil spirits, even those witnessed by means of those linens which touched Paul, were due to the grace and power of God. Although certain churches have adopted the term from pagan society, the New Testament only uses the idea here where exorcism is promised on the basis of the right persons performing the right ritual with the right incantation. But, as we’ve seen, these aren’t the right people and they don’t have the right ritual and incantation, even though they appear to be using the name of Jesus.

These “exorcists” are supposed to be Jewish. You may well wonder why they were identified as such. In the ancient world, it was believed that the Jews had possessed esoteric knowledge that allowed them to manipulate the supernatural since the time of Moses and later, Solomon. In magic, you were not supposed to speak of powerful things lest those things either control you or lose their power through familiarity. So, the fact that the Jews didn’t pronounce the “Ineffable Name” seemed to signify that they were guarding something powerful. So, Jews were considered to be the most powerful magical practitioners and Josephus said (*Antiquities of the Jews*, VIII, 2, 5) that Solomon had developed a ritual and written incantations to perform exorcisms. It’s bizarre and, as we look at Josephus’ account, keep in mind that Solomon married and lot of foreign wives and allowed pagan religion to get in the way of his relationship with God.

*“He put a ring that had a root of one of those sorts mentioned by Solomon to the nostrils of the demoniac, after which he drew out the demon through his nostrils, and when the man fell down immediately, he abjured him to return into him no more, making still mention of Solomon, and reciting the incantations which he composed.”*

 It certainly appears as if those Jewish exorcists thought that if the linen cloths that merely touched Paul could heal people and deliver them from evil powers, they ought to be able to get rid of evil spirits by using the same formula of power, the same name that Paul used when he acted to deliver people of spirits. Let me just say that they weren’t the first people to try to USE Jesus for their own ends and they won’t be the last. But there is a way to know the difference between those who are users and those who want to be USED by Him. Look at their lifestyles.

In verse 14, we get a little bit more detail about these exorcists. In magical terms and religious terms, they ought to have been perfect for the task. There were SEVEN sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest. SEVEN is a lucky number in many cultures and, even in the Bible, it represents God (3) and the created order (4) in right relationship. So, it SHOULD be the “right” number. And certainly, most everyone here can understand the Asian and Middle Eastern emphasis on “sons.” So, it SHOULD have been the “right” agents performing the ritual. And, since the very name of Sceva can mean “Prepared” or “Protected,” one would suspect that all of the ritual details would have been worked out ahead of time.

The name Sceva is neither Semitic nor Greek; it is a Latin cognomen (Scaeva), attested for gladiators who were evidently “left-handed.” The Latin name means, perhaps, that the man was left-handed, “or his name expressed a secondary, metaphorical sense of the word as ‘favorable omen.’” [Schnabel, p. 1402.]. And, finally, we’re told that he was a Jewish high priest. That’s interesting in light of the fact that there was only ONE high priest at a time in Judaism and that there is no record of one named Sceva [Arrington, French L., *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 192, n. 14.].

Arrington suggests, however, that he might have been either a pagan priest or a renegade Jew who claimed to be a priest [Arrington, p. 192, n. 14.]. After all, there are people who claim to be doctors of theology with phony diploma mill degrees and people who claim to be Reverend So-and-So through the mail-order ordination of the Universal Life Church. There have been con-men in every era, so why not in the 1st century? Now, everything sounds good and everything looks good. You have a special number of sons from a special background using the sure-proof name of Jesus to perform a magical ritual. Well, of course it doesn’t work. Ritual tries to FORCE a higher power to do something; faith BELIEVES the promise of a higher power. There IS a difference and God wants FAITH, not ritual. Don’t try to manipulate God. It not only doesn’t work, but it can have unwelcome consequences.

Now, verse 13 tells us that they were saying, “I adjure you by the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches.” Now, the term “adjure” in English expresses a bold challenge or daring request. It doesn’t quite capture the idea of the verb used in this statement. The Greek word is ̔ορκίζω and has the root idea of binding someone to an oath or forcing someone to swear. It is only used twice in the New Testament, here and in Mark 5:7 where the demoniac tries to force Jesus not to harm him by invoking the name of God. The idea is to bind someone with a word of power, sort of like those little kid rituals like saying, “Cross my heart and hope to die” or “I swear on a stack of Bibles.” By the way, in spite of all the little kids I’ve heard use those phrases, remember that Jesus warned us not to swear or tie ourselves to anything in heaven or on earth. Also, if I put up the word εξορκιστ͡ων, you might notice that the verb for “binding” or “forcing to swear” is inside the noun for “exorcist.”

So, we know the sons of Sceva were trying to bind those demons in the name of Jesus, even though they didn’t worship Him. So, what happens? Here’s where it’s almost comedy. Seven men who make their living by pretending that they are powerful enough to control the supernatural all get beaten up by one person. Did you ever hear that someone called a person’s bluff? That’s what happens here. The evil spirit says, “Jesus I know and I’m well-acquainted with Paul, but WHO [on earth] are you?”

“The sons of Scaeva wanted the power to work miracles in the name of Jesus without submitting to him.” [Arrington, p. 194.]. The Lord honors and protects those who are His and who are trying to live according to God’s will, but an imposter is on his/her own. It’s dangerous to fake a relationship with the Lord Jesus. You stick your head for the guillotine of public opinion to turn against you and, if you’re dabbling in spiritual warfare without allowing God full control, you’re liable to get beaten up. You can be beaten up physically, emotionally, spiritually, or more likely, all three when you fake a relationship with Jesus that isn’t real. God wants authenticity. I’ve known people who tried to look like they were more spiritual than they were and guess what happened? They were either exposed as frauds to severe humiliation or they faced crises that they weren’t prepared to deal with. With a real relationship with the Lord Jesus, they could have faced those crises.

What’s the result of all this? Everyone around Ephesus hears what happened with the phony use of the name and reputation of Jesus and they started to do something about it. You see, Ephesus was famous as a center for magical writings and there were lots of spurious scrolls that were sold as “Ephesus letters.” These scrolls were full of mystical sounding gibberish and there appears to have been quite a little cottage industry in providing them. One of the Paris magical manuscripts even misuses the name of Jesus and may reflect this incident. Described by a Harvard professor as a magical cookbook, a particular scroll, pictured on the slide, tells how to cast out demons in the name of the Hebrew God, “Jesu. “

Meanwhile, in Ephesus, people begin to confess what they have done in the past. Now that they consider the use of magic to be dangerous, they hold a book burning. They burned 50,000 pieces of silver worth of scrolls. Why? It was because they not only wanted to stop performing sorcery for themselves, but they wanted to make sure that no one else could use their resources to do so.

In Acts 19:18-20, we read about something significant happening. What was it? The scrolls involved were worth 50,000 drachmas (silver pieces--@ approximately one day’s wage for the average worker). For discussion purposes, I like to ask everyone to imagine that they were going to throw some things away that separate them from God and throw them into the fire.

Acts 19:21 is first indicator of Paul’s ultimate plan to go to Rome [Brown, p. 312.]. We don’t specifically read that Paul was quite finished at Ephesus. In the first two verses of our passage, Paul feels led by God to go to Jerusalem (beyond the extreme south of the map on the slide),re-visit the Greek Isles and Macedonia where he had established some churches, andpreach the gospel in Rome. We also know from his letters that Paul dreamed of going onward to Spain. But here, he sends Timothy and Erastus as advance men back to churches at Philippi and presumably Corinth, but decides he needs to keep ministering in Ephesus a little longer. Now, it doesn’t say whether God did or didn’t LEAD him to stay in Ephesus. I suspect that Paul felt he still had work to do there, but my life experience tells me that God sometimes makes it easier for us to move on by shaking up our circumstances.

What I believe is occurring here is that God is making it easier for Paul to move toward the main event, his defense of the gospel in Rome, his big debut in the capitol. I believe God wanted him to move on and, at the same time, to strengthen the faith of the Ephesian church by allowing them to face a certain amount of opposition. Opposition builds strength and faith if it isn’t debilitating, fatal opposition. What’s the cliché? That which doesn’t kill me makes me stronger? It’s usually true biologically and can be psychologically and spiritually, too.

Now, when we read that the crowd cried, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” We have to realize that a certain amount of manipulation was taking place. In fact, look ahead to verse 32. The NASB reads: “So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together.”

They were really upset because “The Way,” Christianity, was going to cost them and force them to change their lives. And most humans are change resistant. And that’s the same reason many people in secular society don’t like it when you invite them to church, try to share something of your experience with Jesus, or explain something from the Bible. They sense that they might have to sacrifice something they think is valuable, get rid of something that God says is dangerous but they are attached to, or change their world-view. So, they rebuff you or become hostile, they look at you like you’re beneath them or smile at you like you’re ridiculous. All of this happens to be an obvious defense mechanism with regard to people who don’t want to change.

But don’t overlook the fact that this whole process was costing them something. The silversmiths had a most lucrative trade in terms of manufacturing and selling miniature silver niches with images of the goddess inside which were, in turn, taken to the shrine as tokens of worship. “The sale of these small shrines was a source of considerable profit to the silversmiths, and they were alarmed at the fall in the demand for them which the spread of Christianity was causing.” [Bruce, p. 398.].

But let’s get back to the apostle. Paul and two of his companions were dragged by the mob to the theater. Somehow or another, they weren’t dragged all the way inside. Paul, of course, figured that every crowd—hostile or friendly—was an opportunity to preach the gospel. So, he wanted to go in and confront the crowd, but some of his friends who were a little more aware of mob psychology they wouldn’t let him. May I suggest that this portion of the text suggests that Paul has overreached. It doesn’t say that Paul felt led to preach or felt God’s direction to go risk his life. It says that he WANTED to go in and get involved with the assembly. Even some of the leading citizens of the community, the Asiarchs, urged him not to come in and the Asiarchs were the pool from which priests for the Imperial cult would be nominated [Bruce, p. 400; Smith, p. 114.]. So, they weren’t in the least bit Christian or Jewish. They just didn’t want any blood on their hands.

Frankly, there are times when our egos get out of control and I believe this is one of them. Paul seems certain that he could change the crowd’s mind, but the incident with Alexander in verses 33-34 shows that such an effort would have been futile. Alexander was apparently a Jew who was trying to convince the assembly that Jews and Christians weren’t the same. But the crowd didn’t want to be bothered with facts, so they shouted him down. Sometimes people only hear what they want to hear.

In fact, people usually believe what they want to believe. The city clerk, more like the mayor of a modern city, calmed the crowd down in two ways. First, he reaffirmed their belief that Ephesus was special as the warden of the temple (v. 35). Ironically, the word sometimes translated “warden” or “guardian” essentially means “temple sweeper.” That’s almost like the psalm about being a doorman in the house of the Lord. It suggests that even the janitor for a mighty god or goddess was something extra-special. [Guess “chip-sa-nim” would appreciate this idea.] So, he’s saying that Ephesus is mighty special because of what it does for the goddess and then, he reminds them of the image that fell down from heaven. It was believed that the image of the goddess was a gift from Zeus himself.

So, the politician/civic leader/mayor creates a consensus with the crowd, a consensus that Paul couldn’t have reached. And in verse 36, the politician says that the special relationship between Ephesus and the goddess is undeniable, so the Ephesians don’t have to do anything to protect the goddess’s honor. Having created this consensus, he goes on to say that Paul and the brothers haven’t stolen anything or blasphemed directly against Artemis. Of course, it’s probably a good thing that Paul hadn’t gone in to speak because he might have done just that.

The politician says there is no hard evidence against the believers, but if Demetrius has any hard evidence, he needs to go to the proper authorities. After all, if the people keep up their demonstration, there might be some hard evidence against them. Rome didn’t look kindly upon cities where riots took place. Rome would be particularly upset if they avoided the civil authorities, took the law into their own hands like a Wild West lynch mob [Smith, pp. 114-115.].

I also believe it’s indicative of the fact that Paul was acting out of his human ego instead of God’s will in that the near-riot is calmed down by the city clerk speaking to crowd and offering his judgment. The clerk essentially tells the crowd to give him some hard evidence or to shut up. And when things calm down, Paul offers some final instructions to the church and leaves for Macedonia (Acts 20:1).

So, what’s the lesson for us in this passage? First, wherever God is at work, there is going to be opposition. Second, the opposition will usually be because someone is afraid of the cost of letting God’s will be done in both his/her individual life or in society. Third, when God tells you to do something, you need to do it. Don’t wait until you think it’s convenient. Fourth, when you’re inclined to do something, make sure that you are doing it under God’s leading and NOT because of your ego.

***After the riot was over, Paul summoned the disciples and encouraged (coached, invested in) them and paid his respects to them and departed to Macedonia. 2) And he passed through those parts and encouraged (coached, invested in) them with many sermons (lit. words) and came to Greece 3) and he lived there (stayed, remained) for three months. On the point of launching to sea in the direction of Syria, the Jews plotted against him and it was advised that he return to Macedonia. 4) He was accompanied by Sopater, son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia. 5) These went ahead and stayed at Troas 6) but we sailed away from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread and came to Troas after five days, where we spent seven days.***

***7) But on the first day of the week, we gathered together to break bread. Paul engaged in dialogue with them and, since he was to depart the next day, he kept on making observations about the word until midnight. 8) There were sufficient lamps in the room upstairs where we gathered together, 9) and a young man named Eutychus was sitting on a window [sill] and sank into a deep sleep as Paul kept engaging in more dialogue. Weighted down by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was dead [when] lifted up. 10) But Paul went down, threw himself on him, and embraced him, and said, “Don’t be afraid because his life-force [lit. soul] is [still] in him. 11) And going up, breaking the bread, and eating, he conversed a sufficient time until dawn. Then, he left. 12) They brought the lad home breathing and were comforted to no small measure.***

Notice what all of these names have in common. They are all, except for Timothy, identified with a particular place or area. And notice that Paul has ministered in each one of these places before: Berea in Acts 17:11 where they were so anxious to learn about the gospel when Paul and company fled a hostile Thessalonica, Thessalonica where God built a church in spite of the problems described early in Acts 17, Derbe was the site of two visits by Paul in Acts 14:6 and 16:1, Lystra isn’t specified here but we know Timothy from Paul’s other writings, and Asia, of course, refers to a province in what is now Turkey—home of Ephesus, the city from which Paul barely escaped with his life earlier in the book. Now, why would all of these men be coming together from so many places?

The obvious answer, judging from Paul’s other writings, is that they were coming together to bring the offerings taken among the various churches in order to take the money to Jerusalem. And what was the purpose of this offering? It was to assist the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. And who were many of these believers taking up the offering? That’s right, Gentile Christians.

But there are two rather significant and wealthy churches missing from this roll call. Anyone know who they were? If you wrote Corinth and Philippi in your bulletin, you were correct. And we know that the Corinthians gave generously because Paul sent detailed instructions about delivering the money to Titus in II Corinthians 8:6-24. Is it possible that Titus is part of the “we” group with, presumably, Dr. Luke, who set sail in verse 6 of our text? That would solve part of the mystery. The other part is also found in verse 6. Where did “we” sail from? We sailed from Philippi, the wealthy church that had helped Paul in the past (see Philippians 4:10-18).

So, what’s my point? My point is that these people were gathering together to help other believers. Paul’s ministry wasn’t all about outreach; it was also about meeting needs within the fellowship of believers. We make ourselves available when someone is going through a crisis and sometimes, we even feed them. We make an effort to meet needs whether it’s challenging or encouraging them, even just listening to them.

But I’m not quite finished with this cast of characters. There is another lesson to be learned. Sopater is described as the son of Pyrrhus here. We’re certain that it’s not the same King Pyrrhus of Epirus who won a series of battles some 300+ years before the events of our text and lost so many soldiers doing so that he couldn’t continue his campaign. It’s not the person for whom the “Pyrrhic Victory” or costly victory is named. However, one wonders why we get the name of Sopater’s father and no one else’s. Are we supposed to recognize Sopater as part of a once royal family, suggesting that God’s people are assembled from all sorts of bloodlines? That would be my guess.

Acts 19 tells us that Aristarchus was endangered with Paul at Ephesus and Colossians 4:10 tells us that he was imprisoned with Paul. I’ve also mentioned several times that Gaius was the most common first name among the Romans. So, even though we have him associated with Derbe here, we don’t know a lot about him except that he probably was Roman—more of the church family’s diversity with a Roman to go with the Macedonian that is possibly of noble descent. We know that Timothy was a Gentile, half-Jew who studied the Hebrew scriptures and was Paul’s aide and intern in many situations, as was Tychicus an aide to Paul according to Colossians 4:7-8. Trophimus was a Greek who suffered both the anger of the crowd with Paul (Acts 21:29) and illness in the midst of ministry (II Timothy 4:20). Does any of this suggest that things always go smoothly for God’s people or that God miraculously makes everything easy? Of course not! It suggests that God brings a variety of people together from different places, spaces and graces in order to be there for each other when we’re needed.

And even though these men were faithful, let’s not think that all of Paul’s associates hung in there when things got tough. II Timothy 1:15 tells us that Phygeles and Hermogenes completely abandoned Paul and gave up. Don’t EVER be surprised when leaders give up. That’s not what God wants, but it is going to happen. So, be prepared and don’t get flattened by it. Just as families are going to have feuds and black sheep that come and go according to circumstances, so will the church. We need to focus on those we have and what we can be for each other.

Now, Paul was experienced enough to know that this was going to happen. So what do we see him doing over and over again in this text? In verses 1-2, we see Paul encouraging, coaching, training, and supporting them and in verses 7, 9, and 11, Paul continues to teach through midnight and beyond. Let me suggest that we need to be encouraging people as much as possible. We need to be both building people up and toughening people up for the rough times which are inevitable. The good news is that when we are prepared for those rough times, we experience God in a fresh and mighty way. God who meets us in the midst of the storm is more powerful than God who lets us slide along the easy way.

Yet, not everyone is going to hang in there with us. This portion of the passage tells about a young man named Eutychus. Ironically, his name means “Lucky” in Greek. Now, normally, we wouldn’t think of someone who fell asleep and plunged to his death as “Lucky,” but that’s the irony. Perhaps, he’s “lucky” because the Apostle Paul believed God would bring him back to life. The truth is, I can remember jokes about Eutychus from the time I was a little kid growing up in church. In fact, I’ve been accused of being Eutychus myself when I’ve fallen asleep in church. And I’ve seen some of you act as modern versions of Eutychus, even though my sermons have never gone till midnight. On the slide is a cartoon depicting Eutychus as the “patron saint of those who sleep in church.”

But why did the Holy Spirit inspire the early church to keep this story in the Bible? Is it a warning about falling asleep in church? I don’t think so. In fact, it really isn’t clear whether the detail about many lamps is intended to take away Eutychus’ excuse for falling asleep because it would have been really well lit or whether it implied that there would have been so much smoke that it would have made anyone sleepy [Smith, p. 116.]. After all, these lamps were merely cups of olive oil with wicks in them. They would have burned “dirtier” than a candle, for instance.But it isn’t clear why the guy in the window seat would have had it worse than anyone else. Wouldn’t he have been better? Is it an indicator that it’s possible to have too much of a good thing?

I don’t really believe the emphasis is on Eutychus at all. I think the emphasis is on the fact that a tragedy in the church brought everyone together and Paul, as the most mature in faith, led them to look to God for a miracle.

Was this account merelya way of showing that God worked through this New Testament icon in the same way that God worked through that Old Testament icon of Elijah? [Arrington, p. 208.]. Well, maybe not JUST a way of showing that God still worked miracles in Paul’s day and reminding us that God can, according to God’s agenda, still work miracles today, but I think it’s important. I think it demonstrates that Paul, often accused of being harsh and cold-blooded, could empathize with people and minister to their brokenness—physically and spiritually. After all, Elijah was being cared for by the widow in Zarephath during the famine. There was a support system in place and Elijah was transforming her mourning into joy by raising the young man from the dead, just as Paul does in our passage.

Though we could look at both stories and see how Elijah stretched himself over the young man in an analogous fashion to CPR or artificial resuscitation, as well as how Paul’s embrace of the young man sounds a lot like CPR, the important fact is that both the prophet and the apostle rallied to the need when hope seemed to be gone. When hope was gone, they looked to God.

But the amazing thing to me is that they don’t actually dwell on the miracle. They fellowship together and Paul keeps on teaching. They dine together and keep on sharing. I was enamored with a couple of statements from two other pastors. Amazingly enough, both of them deal with relationship. One pastor, Jim Wallis of Sojourners, seems to echo the idea of life’s breath returning to Eutychus when he said: “The creation of living, breathing, loving communities of faith at the local church level is the foundation of all the other answers.” [Wallis, Jim, *The Call to Conversion: Why Faith is Always Personal but Never Private*, (New York: NY: Harper Collins, Publishers, 2005—original, 1992), p. 109.]

In a similar vein, Duke University’s chaplain, William Willimon, wrote on this passage and said, “Into the fixed immobile deadness of things comes a tender embrace.” (William H., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts* [Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 154.] He went on to ask, “What more could a church ask of its Sunday worship than to return into the world on Monday morning alive and ‘not a little comforted.’” [Willimon, p. 155.]. And doesn’t that challenge us? Do we care enough about each other and express enough appreciation and encouragement to each other that we send each other back to school, to work, to the daily grind with new breath, new life, and new expectations?

As the journey progresses, Paul bypasses the major city of Ephesus and goes to the port of Miletus, about 30 miles south of Ephesus. The slide shows the remains of the harbor where Paul, in a hurry to get on to Jerusalem before Passover, probably met with the leaders of the church at Ephesus and delivers what I call Paul’s Farewell Address. It also shows the “stoa,” the reviewing stand/gathering place in the agora (marketplace) which could be another meeting place. “The sermon constitutes Paul’s final directives to those he will never see again (20:25, 38).” [Brown, p. 313.]. It begins with what many call his *apologia pro vita sua* (20:18-21) [Brown, p. 313.]. He begins by declaring that he had lived among them and established his ministry with transparency and humility. That’s significant because of what he’s going to say later.

In fact, he uses the term, humility. That’s a word that you and I take for granted in God’s servants, but it was a favorite word for Paul [Gloag, p. 245.]. Humility was NOT considered a virtue in the Graeco-Roman world as it was considered a sign of weakness. But remember, part of Paul’s journey was learning to live with weakness because it demonstrated God’s strength. It’s a reminder that God’s servants have nothing to prove. So, we need to learn not to blow our own horns, so to speak.

Acts 20:22 has Paul states that the Holy Spirit had chained, bound, tied him up to go to Jerusalem. This is affirmed by the use of the article for THE Spirit, though A. T. Robertson prefers to interpret it as Paul’s own spirit in contrast to the Holy Spirit’s warnings [Robertson, p. 350.]. Now, the idea of being chained by THE Spirit is important to me. It’s important because it’s always frustrated me that God kept sending him people like Agabus (in the next chapter) and brothers and sisters who beg him not to go to Jerusalem. In fact, he says in verse 23 that the Holy Spirit witnessed to him in every city. Personally, I’ve always found it irritating that God bothered to send all of this counsel to Paul and that he arrogantly let it go.

But in preparing this sermon, the verb (usually translated as “compelled”) actually entrapped me and forced me to realize that Paul really did have a sense that, no matter how inconvenient things would become for him, he could not obey the Holy Spirit without going to Jerusalem—no matter how hostile and no matter how fatal [Arrington, p. 209.]. In the past, I’ve almost written this off as a death wish. I’ve accused Paul of being more concerned about his reputation and being stubborn than about spiritual obedience. So, in verse 25, “The grounds of his knowledge were the intimations which he received from the Holy Ghost that bonds and afflictions awaited him at Jerusalem. He felt as one condemned to die; that calamities, and perhaps martyrdom, were in store for him: and hence his presentiment that he would never return to Ephesus.” [Gloag, p. 248.]. But he was willing to go anyway.

Now, I don’t think this means that God tied Paul up to the railroad track of destiny much like the villains in early silent films used to tie the heroines to the tracks. And I can’t believe, from what I see in the rest of the New Testament that Paul is a mere marionette being controlled by having the Holy Spirit pull the strings. The Bible is too clear about free will. I think a clearer example would be to see the Holy Spirit as Paul’s alpine guide and the rope as that lifeline between them. The Holy Spirit knows the summit to which Paul must ascend to reach his full potential and Paul is bound to the Holy Spirit in order to safely ascend the summit.

Now, of course, when I say “safely ascend the summit,” that’s easy for me to say. We know by benefit of hindsight that Paul is going to face imprisonment and suffering, even abandonment by people that he cares about—brothers in the Lord. We suspect, by virtue of the undocumented tradition, that Paul was beheaded at Rome, but tradition tells us that; the Bible doesn’t. But even if he was killed at Rome, he reaches the summit of his theology in writing to the Romans to prepare the way for his coming and he reaches the apex of his ministry when he defends himself on the way to plead his case in Rome.

When he goes on to say that he doesn’t know what will happen except chains and tribulations, he clearly indicates that he knows the outcome isn’t going to be pleasant and that it’s going to look like he failed by continuing toward Jerusalem. Yet, he knows that this will allow him to complete his allotted span of ministry.

Completing his allotted span of ministry is important to the apostle for two reasons. First, he sees this trip as providing the assurance that God’s will has been done. Second, it provides him a personal sense of satisfaction that he has done all that he can to accomplish God’s will in his life. That’s what Paul says here (v. 24) and later, that’s what Paul writes in the letter to the church at Philippi. He has finished the course.

In Paul’s case, the separation was going to allow him to share the gospel with more people than ever before and to show that God was at work in his life—even at this late point and even with everything against him. I think one of the reasons I’m supposed to emphasize this from today’s text is that there are a lot of people who think they’ve messed up too much in life to be able to impact anyone or anything for God or who think they’ve waited too late in life to be able to train for God’s service or accomplish anything in God’s service. But as the baseball great and wordsmith poor, Yogi Berra, once said, “It ain’t over till it’s over!” and that’s especially true when God is in charge of your life. You don’t know who you’re going to affect, even when you think you’re failing, insignificant, or even dying.

In Paul’s case, he knew that the gospel was the important thing and he could make a bold claim. It’s kind of an interesting claim because most manuscripts read that he considers himself free, clean, or innocent of any man’s blood. The Greek word is αιματος. Βut some manuscripts read that he considers himself free, clean, or innocent of any man’s sin. The Greek word is αμαρτιας. Which is it? Well, if you notice how closely they sound alike, it could be either. But you know me? Why choose only one when they both make sense. No one is going to die unnecessarily without hearing the gospel because Paul doesn’t let anything stop him from preaching to everyone. In the same way, no one is going to die under the guilt of sin without hearing the gospel because Paul is making certain that he can preach to everyone. Paul recognizes that he has a responsibility to preach the gospel and that he can’t assume it will get done if he doesn’t do it.

So far, in spite of the potential negatives of Paul’s determination to finish his course, we see progress taking place among the people of God. But Paul is not so naïve that he overlooks human nature. Paul knows what goes on in churches and he is quite right to warn people of what will inevitably happen in a vacuum of spiritual authority. Verse 29 expresses Paul’s belief that savage wolves will come and ravage the flock as soon as Paul leaves.

This is a significant metaphor because Ezekiel 34 has God compare Israel to a flock of sheep and the priests and politicians as bad shepherds. God tells Israel that since her shepherds couldn’t protect her that He himself will come as the “New David.” In the same way, Jesus said that He was the good shepherd and that He knew His flock. So, when Paul says that his absence will allow savage wolves to come in, he will no longer be there to stand between the flock and the devious doctrines described in verse 30. So, it appears that the most pressing problem was false teaching (v. 30), but followed with the idea of making a profit (vv. 33-35). “Somehow, when it comes to duties of the church’s leaders, heresy, infidelity, and love of silver and gold go hand-in-hand.” [Willimon, p. 157.].

Notice the consistency here between this advice to the elders of Ephesus and the advice in 1 Peter 3:2, Titus 1:7, and 1 Timothy 3:3 [Brown, p. 313.].

Now, I don’t know what you think these devious doctrines are, but I’d like to give you the benefit of my long life and suggest a few ways the wolves devour Christian lambs.

1. Devouring joy with negative commands not supported by scripture
2. Devouring energy with arguments and debates that are trivial to scripture
3. Devouring fellowship with competitive self-righteousness
4. Deadening fellowship with a lack of honesty and inability to love
5. Destroying fellowship with accusation and innuendo
6. Devouring trust with gossip and assumption
7. Destroying intellectual honesty with slothful logic and bogus faith
8. Devouring church resources with irresponsible stewardship

Before Paul starts defending himself against charges that he was out for himself, the apostle claims that believers can claim a reward. But it’s not a reward that we can earn. It’s a reward that comes from grace alone. What is that reward? It is experiencing God’s presence in the experience of sanctification—becoming more what God wants us to be.

So, here are the hard questions we need to answer after encountering this text. On the slide, I paraphrased the title of one of Watchman Nee’s books: *What Shall This Man Do?* I really want to ask what you and I should do.

First, when God challenges us to do something, are we willing to move forward even when we know it’s going to be difficult for us personally? Or, do we only serve God when it’s convenient?

Second, are we aware that, in serving God, there will be a lot of farewells—a lot of folks we have to leave behind? And we need to ask ourselves if we’re willing to do that. Are we willing to let people leave our fellowship? Are we willing to strike out on a new venture?

Third, do we have a commitment to FINISHING? Do we expect God to finish projects and objectives in our lives or are we marking time?

Fourth, are we aware of the savage wolves that might come among us?

Fifth, are we allowing God to work in our lives both to build up His inheritance and to make us more what God wants us to be?