

### THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### Lesson 41, Chapter 18

We continue in the Book of Acts chapter 18 as we see how Paul continued the expansion of the Yeshua movement into places more and more distant from its birthplace in Judea and Galilee. In this chapter we are told about Paul being a tentmaker (and by the way, the term for his trade in Greek, *skenopoios*, literally means leather maker), and how his trade helped him to connect with a Believing Jewish couple who had recently been expelled from Rome under the edict of Emperor Claudius. The reason for Aquila and Priscilla's expulsion? They were Jews. All Jews were ordered to leave Rome around 49 or 50 A.D. because it seems they constantly fought amongst themselves, and then tended to persuade their gentile neighbors to join in the fray. This sort of civil unrest was not tolerated in the Roman Empire and was dealt with swiftly and harshly.

While it is not certain, because the edict of Claudius specifically says that a person named Chrestus was the chief instigator of the Roman disturbances, and because The Way was also indicated as somehow being the impetus for the ruckus, it is thought by many Bible scholars that Chrestus was not a person living at that time but rather was referring to Christ. Not Christ in the flesh but rather his teachings that of course form the foundation of the Believing community.

But this opens another interesting subject that adds to our understanding of Paul the person and the way he was viewed in those days. In the Greco-Roman world manual labor was looked down upon. Work like carpentry, brick laying, and tent making were considered menial tasks beneath the station and dignity of Roman citizens. In fact even the Greek words denoting manual labor long carried with them a rather demeaning flavor. The many minority ethnic groups that helped populate the Roman Empire provided the valuable blue collar labor needed within Roman society; but at the same time they were looked down upon as ignorant and uncultured people.

This explains the interesting backlash that occurred with especially the Christian community that arose after 100 A.D. Christianity infused into manual labor an aura of dignity, and a good work ethic as a moral virtue. There is a fascinating story about the early Church Father Augustine chastising some monks who were much too idle in his estimation and he criticized their refusal to get their hands dirty (so to speak), and so he extolled the virtues of hard work and toil; he used Paul as his example. So he and others began to see Paul as a good example of living a simple life that refused slothfulness and luxury by means of honest work that involved manual labor.

The irony of this is that Paul was born into Jewish aristocracy. He was sent to the finest Jewish religious school (Gamaliel's), and then very quickly afterwards began serving not as a humble craftsman but rather as a sophisticated and intellectual staff member of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin. The status of a tentmaker was in conflict with the status of a learned Pharisee and

operative for the Jewish High Court; it is also not indicative of his privileged upbringing and social station. So how, when and why did Paul learn the trade of a lowly tentmaker? After all, he well knew what being a common laborer meant in the Roman Empire. There is nothing that tells us how all this came about; but I think it is somewhat less than speculation to say that he probably did it for 2 reasons. One, as a means of supporting himself anywhere he happened to be, once he became an itinerant teacher of the Gospel. And two, it was a means to distance himself from Jewish aristocracy and the ties he had with the Sanhedrin, and instead to align himself with the common Jews who were usually craftsmen. Essentially not long after his salvation Paul chose not only to identify himself with Christ on a spiritual level, but also to identify himself with common folk on a social level. Clearly Paul was going to evangelize enormously more common folk than aristocrats. This is a great lesson for those among us who want to teach, evangelize and lead others to Yeshua. We need to identify with those to whom we speak. We need to refrain from holding ourselves as above and separate. Yet Paul was merely following the example of His Master Yeshua. Yeshua was a carpenter and so far as we know He continued to be one throughout His adult life and ministry. He didn't present His message to the religious leadership or the influential, but rather to the everyday Jew. He didn't hang out with the wealthy, and then at times go make a speech to the poor. His 12 disciples were the Jewish working class; not the Jewish elite.

I am persuaded that even if by God's will there may at times be a difference in education and affluence between teacher and student, there does not need to be an intentionally visible difference in class and status (and it is far more sincere and effective if there is not). I know a few wealthy Believers who most people would have no idea of their affluence unless they knew them as well as I do because these folks don't hold themselves apart from those who God has not favored materially. They refuse the most expensive clothes and cars; they shun expensive jewelry, diamond encrusted watches and other obvious symbols of wealth. Rather their attitude is that the less they spend on those things the more they can spend to help others and do God's will in His kingdom.

This is another reason that I like and admire Paul. He to me is not only a man's man, he is also indifferent to wealth and prestige. Oh, he would make good use of his Roman citizenship and his elite education; but it was to do God's work of spreading the Good News as opposed to spending time building bigger barns and enriching himself. He saw it not as demeaning to live among the average workers and to labor with his hands, but rather he wanted to be near to those he sought to teach and to utilize his craft as the means to support himself so that he could accomplish his mission without placing that burden upon others.

Paul intentionally remade himself so that he could follow the Lord all the better. As we read about Paul we see why early Church Fathers claimed that heavenly angels honored him, and demons trembled at him so that he could honestly say without bragging that (as taken from Acts 20:34) "These same hands served my need and those who were with me."

Let's follow Paul a little farther on his second missionary journey. He is now in Corinth and soon will be in Ephesus.

Open your Bibles to Acts chapter 18.

### RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 18:4 – end

Paul, in vs. 6, essentially tells those who refuse to listen to him about God's mercy through Yeshua that they are committing spiritual self-murder. And that he has done his part by telling them about the Gospel and therefore also the consequences of rejecting it, and so bears no further responsibility in the matter. That, folks, is really the attitude we are to have. We are to speak the truth of the Good News to whomever the Lord puts in our path and whatever happens thereafter is between that person and God. It is not up to us whether this person enters the Kingdom of God. It is not our failure if they do not, or our victory if they do. However for us to be derelict in our duty to tell others about Yeshua (people that we know need it) in some ways makes us complicit in their possible destruction.

Apparently Paul hung in there as long as he could but eventually the rising opposition to his message grew so contentious that he had to withdraw from speaking in this particular synagogue in Corinth. There seems to have been at least two. He didn't have far to go to find a new venue to continue his teaching; next door to this particular synagogue lived a God-fearing gentile name Titius Justus who no doubt attended that synagogue and he opened his house to Paul and those who wanted to hear him. But even more interestingly the leader of the synagogue, Crispus, also came to faith and (as was customary) his entire household followed suit. One has to wonder if since the synagogue was so split over this issue of salvation in Yeshua that Crispus was able to remain as its president; Luke doesn't tell us.

The contentiousness of the situation was obviously of great concern to Paul. Yes, he had a number of successes (some of which he speaks about in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians). At the same time the going had been rough and no doubt wearying to him. So the Lord (whether this means the Father or Yeshua we're not told) comforts and encourages Paul by telling him in a vision to go on speaking and preaching because despite the strong words spoken against him no one in Corinth will actually do him any harm. And the reason that no harm will come is that the Lord says that He has "many people in this city". Does that mean that these people (whoever they are) will protect Paul? Possibly. But I think it also gives Paul a kind of assurance that we all seek: strength in numbers. Paul is not alone; there are many like-minded God-fearers and Jews in Corinth that he simply isn't aware of. So this knowledge comforted Paul sufficiently that he stayed in Corinth (despite all the opposition) for 18 months teaching those who would heed God's Word. But then conditions changed.

Gallio became the new proconsul over the province of Achaia starting in 50 or 51 A.D. and remained in his position for 3 years. So this gives us a pretty good marker in time to know when this scene is taking place. The Jews that remained in strong opposition to Paul actually brought a judicial case against him and took him to court. That is, there weren't riots in the streets in Corinth as protest as we saw in other places Paul went. Rather there was a well thought out attempt by the Jewish community to officially outlaw what Paul was teaching. We see this exact thing in Israel today. Proselytizing Jews in Israel isn't just discouraged; it is illegal and is punishable with heavy fines and jail time. The effect of what Proconsul Gallio could decide in the case, and what Israel in modern times has decided, has a profound effect on being able to spread the Gospel. It is one thing to battle individuals; it is quite another to battle against official government policy.

So what was the specific charge brought against Paul? Verse 13 says that “This man is trying to persuade people to worship God in ways that violate the law”. Our CJB says “violate the Torah”, but that is a bit misleading. The Greek word used here is **nomos** and it properly translates into English as “law”. So what “law” do the Jews claim Paul is violating? Roman law? Or does it mean like the editor of the CJB inserts, the Torah law? Please pay close attention since the answer affects how we interpret much of the New Testament. I have no doubt that it means neither of those things. Rather it means **Halakhah**; Jewish law. And since these are not terms that most Believers are familiar with (except here in Torah Class, perhaps), let me remind you that **Halakhah** is a fusion of the Biblical Torah, Jewish Tradition, and Jewish customs. The typical term that was used throughout the New Testament, however, is simply “The Law”.

While when used in its most technical and original sense the term “The Law” points to that part of the Biblical Torah where the laws of Moses are written down, that was in Paul’s day (and remains so to this day) no longer what it is referring to except in rare cases. The Law usually, and in common every day speech among Jews, meant **Halakhah**: Jewish Law. And just to make things a bit more confusing for us, the term “Torah” had also evolved to carry a dual meaning. At times it was used in its technical sense as meaning the first 5 books of the Bible; but in its more common usage it had become synonymous with **Halakhah**. Is this knowledge important to the average Bible reader? No; it is critical because Paul uses the term “the Law” over and over again in his epistles and we need to understand what he means by that.

If we don’t understand that the vast majority of the time that we see the word “law” that Paul means **Halakhah** (but there was no parallel Greek word for this Hebrew term, and there is no English word either), and only sometimes is he referring to the laws found in the Biblical Torah, then it sends us down rabbit trails that produce erroneous doctrines that have led Christianity into an underlying anti-Semitism that many Believers don’t even realize is there. But worse, all too often due to these misunderstandings by gentile Christians (going all the way back to some of the earliest Church Fathers), mainstream Church doctrine has Paul declaring that the Torah Law of Moses is a bad thing, a faulty thing, which God finally acknowledged was doing more harm than good and so He abolished it. Thus Church doctrine literally has Paul disputing against Christ’s declaration of Matthew 5 that the Law is NOT abolished and in fact not the smallest iota of it will change until heaven and earth passes away (which, by the way, actually occurs at the end of the 1000 year reign of Christ, and you can read about it in Revelation 21).

So the Jews of Corinth are complaining to Gallio that Paul is teaching things that violate Jewish Law. Verse 14 explains that Paul was just about to say something to defend himself when Gallio said to the accusers that he was not going to involve himself because from a Roman law standpoint, no crime had been committed and no injury had been caused. So he had better things to do than to adjudicate internal Jewish religious fights.

Let me have all of your attention for a moment, please: one of the most common lines of thought in Biblical commentary on this passage is that here we see the Jews of Corinth telling Gallio that essentially what Paul taught was not Jewish, and rather that it was Christianity, which was a totally separate religion. So Christianity and Judaism were now different and

separate. And while Judaism was legally sanctioned in the Roman Empire, obviously Christianity was not and so the Roman proconsul needs to outlaw Paul and his illegal Christianity. The venerable F.F. Bruce in his commentary on Acts says: ***“The charge which was preferred against Paul before Gallio was that of propagating a (new) religion and on that basis forming a society not countenanced by Roman Law”***. Not one word in this recorded conversation between the Jews of Corinth and Gallio remotely implies, let alone addresses, such a thing; so why would such an accomplished scholar as F. F. Bruce come to this strained conclusion? Because it is the classic case of Christian Biblical apology; it is the method of working backwards from an established Church doctrine in order to try to find a basis for it in the Scriptures. And yet here in the words of the pertinent Biblical passage we have the complaining Jews saying outright that Paul, the Jew, was not following Jewish law and Gallio responds straightforwardly that this is entirely about Jewish internal affairs and so Roman law had no bearing on it. Folks: there was no such thing as a separate religion called Christianity until well after New Testament times; not until gentiles gained control of the Jesus movement. And that would not happen for another half century or so from the time of the Book of Acts. So we can say with certainty that as of 52 or 53 A.D., the time of Acts chapter 18, neither the Jews nor the Romans saw any distinction between Jews and members of The Way. They were simply different sects of the same religion: Judaism.

So what did these angry unbelieving Jews do when Gallio refused their request? They took another synagogue leader named Sosthenes and beat him up in full view of Gallio, who expressed no interest in stopping it. The \$64,000 question is why was this man beaten? My opinion is that Sosthenes had allowed Paul to speak in the synagogue and so they blamed him for the schism. Other commentators think that perhaps Sosthenes had become a Believer (although you'd think Luke would have said so if that was the case). It may well be for both of these reasons. Some of the confusion on this matter comes from the fact that in the 1<sup>st</sup> verse of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians we read of Paul addressing his letter as from him and Sosthenes. Could this be the same Sosthenes, head of a synagogue, who perhaps fled with Paul after his beating? Might it be a different Sosthenes (Sosthenes was a reasonably common name)? We just don't know.

Before we get to verse 18, let's pause. What we have just read and studied is the condition of the Jewish community in Corinth. We see that not only are unbelieving Jews in a severe rift with believing Jews, but also that the unbelieving Jews were determined to stop any of Paul's teachings from circulating because it affronted their traditions. What we have here is a volatile situation. Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians was written very shortly after he left Corinth and arrived in Ephesus. So the context of that letter is what we have just read about. Everything he has to say to the Believers in Corinth is said with the troubles that Paul experienced, and what the Believers he is writing to are currently experiencing, as the backdrop. Therefore there could be no better time for us to read some of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians as a sort of extension of Acts chapter 18.

### **READ 1CORINTHIANS CHAPTERS 1 & 2 all**

Just note a few things about the tone and purpose of this letter. First it is an “us versus them” tone. Second it is meant to encourage the Believers there that despite all the opposition and all

their fellow Jews who constantly try to talk them out of their faith in Yeshua, they need to stand fast. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 1 Paul says: ***“For the message about the execution stake (the cross) is nonsense to those in the process of being destroyed, but to us in the process of being saved it is the power of God”***. And in the final few verses of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 2 Paul says, ***“Now the natural man does NOT receive the things of the Spirit of God; to him they are nonsense! Moreover he is unable to grasp them. But the person who has the Spirit can evaluate everything, while no one is in a position to evaluate him.”*** And he ends with the words: ***“We have the mind of Messiah”***.

So Paul is telling these Corinthian Jewish Believers that even though they are under such pressure by the majority of the Jewish religious community to give it up and return to the long established and accepted ***Halakhah***, that it is the Believers who have it right and so they should not waver. And the reason that they are able to “get it” while so many more Jews in Corinth are unable to “get it”, is because the Believers have the Spirit of God in them while the unbelievers do not.

Let me make application of that for our day. I get literally hundreds of emails, and I have many in this congregation as well as out of town visitors, who all ask me why it is that they can see so plainly that our Messiah is Jewish, that the Bible is of course a Hebrew document born in a Hebrew culture, that God continues to love Israel as His firstborn (He hasn’t rejected them and replaced Israel with the Church), and that the Torah and the entire Old Testament are as alive and relevant to us as the New, when most of their friends and family can’t? And why does the vast majority of the Church not get it either? Mankind is used to measuring truth and right according to consensus. If more people believe differently than what I believe, then they must be right and I must be wrong because they have more people on their side. Paul flatly refutes that notion as he says the consensus of humans is not the measurement of rightness; rather the presence of the Holy Spirit and His teaching is how rightness is determined.

My Hebrew Roots and Messianic friends, to use Paul’s words and tone, we are right and they are wrong. The only proper way to not only a right relationship with God, but a right approach to living a redeemed life, is by returning to a balanced teaching on God’s Grace along with a renewed devotion to obedience to the Heavenly Father. It takes a lot of courage, fortitude and faith to swim against the current stream of Christian thinking that anything-goes, and truth is whatever you discern to be, just as long as we love one another. But if Yeshua and His 12 disciples could do it in the face of being ostracized from their community, and threatened with prison, torture and death, can we not stand strong merely in the face of disagreement, mild criticism, and perhaps being shunned by a few? In fact I must conclude from what we read throughout the Bible and comparing it to actual life experience, it is that if we are **not** seen as **pariahs** to the mainstream religious institutions, we are probably on the wrong side.

<sup>CJB</sup> ***Luke 14:26 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father, his mother, his wife, his children, his brothers and his sisters, yes, and his own life besides, he cannot be my talmid”.***

Following God and living our lives in the Biblically mandated way have consequences. But it also brings us the greatest rewards.

Vs. 18 of Acts 18 says that after the incident with Paul being dragged before Gallio, he continued on in Corinth for a while before leaving for Syria, but only after he had his hair cut short for a vow in a place called Cenchrea. Apparently the Jewish couple Aquila and Priscilla agreed to accompany him. No doubt the trip to Syria was to take him full circle back to Antioch and end his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey there.

What are we to make of this vow that Paul made, part of which included ceremonially cutting his hair? First, Cenchrea was a port city near Corinth; it was where he caught a ship to sail to back home. The issue of the hair cutting sounds very much like a Nazarite vow that Paul might have undertaken; what exactly the vow was about we don't know. Scholars argue fiercely over this verse because for one thing, if one looks closely at the Nazarite vow as outlined in the Torah, it is hard to see where it fits in this story. The Mishna has a great deal to say about vows such as the reasons for entering into one: reasons such as healing, returning home safely from war, and praying for a son. But it also speaks in detail about the various protocols and rituals that could be legitimately employed in vow making and those that could not. So what we find is that vows were on the one hand seen as something to be wary of and to be honored at all costs; but on the other hand it is clear that vows were popular and done regularly such that clear instruction was offered about it.

So because any kind of detail or nuance is completely lacking about Paul's vow, we'll not speculate too much. What we can know, however, is that this doesn't precisely follow the Torah Law about Nazarite vows, however it does seem to follow Jewish tradition and custom; **Halakhah**. This fact is significant because it shows Paul continuing to adhere to traditional Judaism as a matter of course; it shows him following Jewish Law many years after encountering the risen Messiah on the road to Damascus. Clearly Paul did not find the entire institution of Jewish Law, **Halakhah**, as wrong minded or something to be abandoned upon faith in Christ. And Paul was also not in process of moving away from a Jewish identity to a gentile Christian one. The Jewish Paul was remaining Jewish.

The ship he is on makes a port call at Ephesus. And because Ephesus was of good size it too had a synagogue. There he preached to the Jews about Messiah. Nothing is said about his success or failure, only that they hoped he would stay longer so obviously he was far better received in Ephesus than he had been in Corinth. But his schedule wasn't his own; when the time came for his ship to continue its journey he would have to go. It was during this short stay in Ephesus that he wrote his famous letter to the Corinthians that has since become a book of the Bible. However he promised that if it was on God's agenda, he would come back to Ephesus and teach them more. The ship's destination was the harbor at Caesarea Maritima.

Next week we'll follow Paul as he first goes to Jerusalem and then north to the synagogue in Antioch that was sponsoring his missionary journeys.