

Acts 18:1-17, No. 37
“The Day of Salvation”
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We’ve been away from Acts for a month, so let me remind you where we are. Paul is in the midst of what is called his *second missionary journey*. Remember, “journey” is an appropriate description of this period in Paul’s career so long as we realize that very little of his time was actually spent traveling. He spent the lion’s share of his time in a few places and in some places, as we will see, he spent extended periods of time. So far he has planted churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, and, while waiting for his younger colleagues to join him in Athens, evangelized the Athenian philosophical community, the Areopagus. But he has now moved on to Corinth. Luke’s narrative is full of fascinating detail and I want to make sure you appreciate the story as he tells it.

Text Comment

- v.1 Corinth would prove to be one of the most important venues for Paul’s missionary work. He was to spend a year and half in this great city of the Roman world on his first visit and then months in addition on his second. Corinth was not the seat of Greco-Roman philosophy as Athens still thought itself to be. It was instead a great commercial center. In Corinth people *were on the move!* It commanded the major trade route sending goods both east and west across the Mediterranean Sea. It had a harbor on the eastern side of the isthmus that connected the Peloponnesian peninsula to the Greek mainland, and a harbor on the western side. Its markets were stocked with goods from all over the world. Paul must have thought that if trade goods could travel in all directions from Corinth, so could the gospel. [Stott, 294] It was also a notoriously wicked city. A Greek verb of the period, *korinthiazomai*, literally “to act the Corinthian,” was a synonym for “to fornicate.” On the city’s prominent summit, the Acrocorinth, stood a dazzling temple to Aphrodite or Venus, the goddess of love. A thousand female slaves served in that temple and worked the city streets at night as prostitutes. Corinth has been described as “the Vanity Fair of the Roman Empire.”
- v.2 There was a substantial Jewish synagogue in Corinth, as we would expect of an important commercial center. The remains of the inscription placed over the door of that synagogue has been found in the ruins of the city.
- v.3 This is the persecution that Suetonius, the Roman historian [*Life of Claudius*, 25], says resulted from the Jews “constantly making disturbances at the instigation of one “Chrestus.” Chrestus was not an uncommon name, but since Chrestus and Christus would have been pronounced the same way by Latin speakers in those days, and since Tacitus, another contemporary Roman historian, refers to Christians as “Chrestiani,” it has long been suspected that the expulsion of the Jews resulted in some way from the controversy within the Jewish community over the preaching of Jesus Christ, very like the controversy that occurred in Corinth as we shall see.

The suggestion is that Priscilla and Aquila were already Christians by the time Paul met them, otherwise we assume Luke would have mentioned their conversion. They are always mentioned together in the New Testament, sometimes Priscilla first, sometimes Aquila. Paul and Aquila shared a trade, tent-making or leather-working (the term can mean either as the trades overlapped; in those days tents were made out of goat hair or leather). We learn later in this same chapter that the couple accompanied Paul to Ephesus and became an important part of the church there. Precisely how, we don't know, but they became valuable assistants of Paul in his work.

Paul would later teach on several occasions that Christian teachers had a right to be supported by those they taught, but Paul renounced that right in part to avoid giving anyone the impression that he was, as were so many other itinerant teachers in those days, in it for the money. He wanted to be able to say that he preached the gospel "free of charge" (1 Cor. 9:18). As you know, the term "tent-maker" entered the Christian vocabulary from this text and even today describes missionaries who support themselves with some trade or business but whose primary interest is to bring the gospel to people who would otherwise never hear of Jesus Christ. So Paul, who worked his trade during the week and, on the Sabbath and during the evenings, taught in the synagogue.

- v.5 We know from information elsewhere in the New Testament that when Timothy and Silas rejoined Paul from Berea, they brought news of the steadfastness of the Thessalonian converts (1 Thess. 3:6) as well as some questions which Paul's assistants apparently had not thought themselves competent to answer. This was what prompted Paul to write his first letter to the Thessalonians. Silas and Timothy also brought a gift of money from the Philippian Christians (cf. Phil. 4:15 with 2 Cor. 11:8-9). This gift relieved him of the need to work for his living for a time and enabled him to devote himself entirely to preaching and teaching.
- v.5 Once again, we have a simple summary of Paul's message to the Jews: the Messiah, the Christ they had so long waited for, had come and he was Jesus of Nazareth.
- v.6 By now this opposition to his preaching on the part of the Jews has become a familiar experience. The strongest opposition to the gospel has always come from within the church! When Paul had done as much as he could to evangelize the Jews, he left the synagogue and turned to the Gentile population of the city.
- v.7 That is to say someone who was attracted to the Jewish faith, worshipped at the Jewish synagogue, but was himself a Gentile. Titus was his *nomen* (the name of his clan), Justus was his *cognomen* (family name), but what was his *praenomen* or what we could call his first name? It has been suggested by some that it was Gaius and that he was the Gaius to whom Paul refers as "Gaius my host," in Romans 16:23 (Romans was written from Corinth on a later visit to the city.) He would then be, apparently, the Gaius of 1 Cor. 1:14, one of the few Corinthian converts Paul baptized himself. You will understand that Paul's decision to set up next door to the synagogue was unlikely to win Jewish friends.

- v.8 It is somewhat surprising, surely, that the first convert mentioned *after Paul's turn to the Gentiles* was the ruler, the chief man of the Jewish synagogue. The text, as it stands, does not necessarily mean that everyone in Crispus' household was suddenly converted as he had been, but that the household came *with Crispus*, its leader, into his newfound faith, the solidarity of the family creating that unity in faith. This is an important example of God keeping his promise to save his people in their households, of which we have a number of illustrations in Acts.
- v.17 At some point during those eighteen months the Jews mounted a concerted effort to see Paul routed, driven from the city if not worse. The Lord hadn't promised Paul that he wouldn't be bothered if he kept preaching in Corinth; only that he would come to no harm.

That Gallio was proconsul of Achaia (the Roman province in which Corinth was located) during this time is an important means of dating the ministry of Paul and of his various letters. It's probably the most important datum from which the various seasons of Paul's ministry and his various letters are dated. Gallio's proconsulship is known to have begun in A.D. 51. He was the younger brother of the famous stoic philosopher, Seneca, who was, if you remember, the tutor of Nero when he was young. Seneca, interestingly, once remarked on his brother's tolerant spirit. Judaism was a *religio licita*, a lawful religion in the empire of the time – one formally recognized by the state – and so the charge of the Jews amounted to Christianity being an *unlawful* religion, that is, one not recognized by Roman law. But Gallio judged the dispute to be an intra-mural Jewish squabble (that is, he took Christianity to be a variation of Judaism). His conclusion gave Christianity – at least in Corinth – an implied legal status or legitimacy. It would be withdrawn in A.D. 62 when the emperor Nero married an adherent of Judaism.

Now there are two opinions about what happened next. One is that “they all” in v. 17 refers to the Greek population who, once they realized that Gallio wasn't going to interfere, vented their anti-Jewish feeling against the ruler of the synagogue. The other, perhaps more likely suggestion, is that Sosthenes was already a Christian sympathizer. You may remember that Sosthenes appears in 1 Cor. 1:1 as a co-author of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church. His conversion would have been particularly galling, for he would have been the second ruler of the synagogue in a short time to have converted to the Christian faith. If so, it would have been the Jews, administering their own justice – the 39 stripes – knowing that Gallio would let them do it.

We live today in a world of large cities. We forget how different our world is in this respect from what it was not so long ago. In the 19th century and into the 20th most Americans and most people lived in the country, on farms or in small towns. Not so any longer. Approximately half of the population of the state of Washington lives in the Seattle metro area, that is, in the largest urban area of the state. Washington is a big state – I drove across it the other day – but by far most of its people live in its few principal cities.

In the middle of the 19th century there were only four cities *in the world* with a million inhabitants. Today there are hundreds. In 1950 there were only two *megacities*, a new

phenomenon in world history, cities of ten million inhabitants or more. Only London and New York were cities of that size. But somewhat more than a half-century later there are between twenty and thirty such cities. Mexico City, for example, now numbers something like thirty million inhabitants. More than half of the world's population now lives in cities and the percentage is still higher in Europe and the United States.

With urbanization has come, as we know, a host of consequences: upward mobility to be sure and ever larger numbers of people who are financially well-off, if not wealthy; a more multi-racial and multi-cultural society to be sure, but in many other ways a more homogenous one. *McDonalds*, for example, would struggle to thrive if most Americans still lived on farms or in small towns! There would be few shopping malls if we were still a largely rural society. All of that on the one hand. But, at the same time, there is in these cities a concentration of grinding poverty, often miserable housing, social alienation, a steep decline in religious commitment, racial and cultural disharmony, sexual licentiousness, crime, and a host of other social pathologies with which the urban world is now all too familiar. Concentrate sinners in one place and you get a lot of sin!

But Paul was a man of the city. He hailed from Tarsus, a considerable town for its time; we meet him first in Jerusalem, a major city of the ancient world, where he had studied for the rabbinate; his misbegotten strategy to destroy the Christian movement involved, as you remember, persecuting Jewish Christians in Damascus, where apparently he thought, and correctly, since it was a large city with a large Jewish population, a good number of Christians could be found. As an apostle he began his public ministry, so far as the book of Acts is concerned, in Antioch, one of the principal cities of the Roman Empire, and when he embarked on his career of evangelism and church planting it was to cities, one after another, that he went. Indeed, so far we have read of Paul's ministry only in larger towns and cities, from Antioch to Athens. No doubt he spoke of Christ to rural innkeepers and passersby along the roads he traveled through the countryside, but we have no record of that. His itinerary on his first missionary tour and now on his second was determined by what cities lay in his path. True enough, these were not cities of the size we are used to. The world's population at that time was much smaller than it is today. When Paul visited Athens, of which visit we read in chapter 17, the population of that famous city may have been no more than 10,000 souls. *But then as now cities were where the people were.*

Additionally, since Paul's strategy seemed to be, whenever possible, to begin his evangelistic ministry in the Jewish synagogue, it appears it was his plan to focus attention on the larger cities where there was likely to be found a Jewish synagogue as well as larger numbers of people in general. [Stott, 291-292] And some of those cities were large indeed. This next section of Acts concentrates on Paul's extensive ministry in two of the great cities of the Roman world, Corinth and Ephesus. Corinth, at its zenith, had perhaps three-quarters of a million inhabitants, an immense city by ancient standards. Ephesus had something in the neighborhood of half a million.

The cities of those days, like the cities of our day, took pride in themselves. Their citizens come to think themselves more important because they live in such a city. They attach their own reputation to the reputation of the city in which they live. Julius Caesar himself had rebuilt the city in 46 B.C. Think of them as modern New Yorkers, who tend to think of themselves as more

sophisticated, if not more important than everyone else; the movers and shakers of society in commerce, in art, and in everything else. No wonder Paul would later write to the Corinthian Christians that when he came to Corinth the first time he, came in weakness and fear and much trembling (1 Cor. 2:3). These were not the sort of people likely to pay attention to the message Paul was bringing. It was a message that was hard on human pride and hard on sensuality and worldliness, all prominent features of Corinthian life. Paul knew the going would be tough in Corinth, but it was where the people were and so he wanted to be there. Paul would have said what another minister once said of his own ministry:

Some wish to live within the sound
Of church or chapel bell.
I want to run a rescue shop
Within a yard of hell.

But people did believe! Paul would later remind the Corinthians that among the converts to Christianity, not many were wise, as the world measures wisdom, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth. But there were some of those, as there have always been, Crispus and Sosthenes among them, almost certainly men of substance in the city, being as they were, one after the other, the leader of the large Jewish synagogue in the city and those Jews having among them prosperous, wealthy families. We also know that the treasurer of the city, a man named Erastus, was also a convert, for Paul mentions him in Romans 16:23. But wealthy and powerful or not, they came to Christ in numbers. *It was a time of salvation in Corinth!*

This is what makes this history so important; it is the history *of salvation*, of people of various races, ethnicities, socio-economic status, age, sex, and religion abandoning their former view of life, their former interests, their former objects of devotion, to commit themselves to Jesus Christ as their Savior and their Master. They came to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the divine/human Savior of sinners that Paul taught he was and that he had brought salvation in just that way Paul explained: by his death on the cross and by his resurrection from the dead.

As so often in Acts, one person represents a large number. In this case it was Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue *who believed in the Lord*, Luke's shorthand for Crispus' coming to understand that Jesus was the Son of God and the Savior of the world and that by committing his life to Jesus he would live life as God intended while he remained in this world *and* obtain life eternal in the next.

It was, in Crispus' case as in the case of many others, as we have said before, a *conversion*, a fundamental change of life; as one old father put it, a fundamental change of a man or woman's chief end, that is of his or her purpose in life. We don't have that word here, "conversion," but the thing itself is here. Another way the New Testament, indeed Jesus himself, describes what happened to these people in Corinth, is to say that they were *born again*. That is how profound, how transformative was this revolution in heart and life, in commitment, and in conduct, in loyalty and in love. It was as if the people were starting life all over again.

And, once again, as also elsewhere in Acts, we have this change described both from the human side and the divine. Crispus *believed in the Lord*. He put his eggs in Jesus' basket, he committed

his life to him, he trusted him for his hope of peace with God and the forgiveness of his sins, and he changed his ways accordingly as he began to follow Jesus as Lord. All of this is what Crispus *did*. It was because he did that he provoked the resentment of other Jews.

But in a famous statement of divine election and sovereign grace, we read in v. 10 that the Lord Christ told Paul in a vision that *he had many in this city who are my people*. That is, Paul had to remain in Corinth because there were many others whom the Lord intended to bring to faith in himself. There were others he would draw to faith in himself. Why? Because they were, in an ultimate sense, *already the Lord's people by what the Bible calls election*. As we read in chapter 13, they were among those who were *appointed to eternal life*. In other words, in preaching Christ in Corinth Paul was the instrument of Christ's own plan of salvation, preaching to a great many so that those whom God had chosen for salvation would hear the gospel, believe it, and be saved. That is what salvation is everywhere in the Bible, a human response to the gospel made possible by the grace of God himself; people believing in Jesus because the Holy Spirit was changing their hearts and drawing them to the Lord. And not only those who first heard and believed becoming Christians, but their families with them, as was true of Lydia and the jailer in Philippi and of Crispus here in Corinth. Jesus, remember, had told his disciples before his death, "I have other sheep not of this fold – that is, not Palestinian Jews – I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." [John 10:16] And because Jesus had many in the city of Corinth Paul stayed and preached and the church grew to a considerable number, a number so large that everyone soon took notice. In other words, what we have here is both a *description* of salvation and an *explanation* of it. Men and women *believed* because God called them.

I happened to read over my vacation the Baylor University history professor, Thomas Kidd's, scintillating new biography of George Whitefield, the great preacher of the 18th century Awakening. And what struck me, as I worked on Acts 18 was how strikingly similar to Paul's history in Corinth was Whitefield's history in Great Britain and America in the mid-18th century. Influential as Whitefield was in England, Kidd reminds us that he remains still today probably the most influential churchman in the history of the North America, however little his name may be known today. His was a household name in colonial America – as many people knew of him as of Ben Franklin or George Washington, and probably more – and as beloved as any Christian preacher has ever been in our history. Whitefield's ministry is a thrilling story of salvation according to the same template laid down here in Acts 18. It was then, as it was in Corinth long before, *a day of salvation. People came to Christ in great numbers, often suddenly and dramatically and utterly unexpectedly*. Young men, such as Whitefield, became Christians themselves, as Paul became a Christian as a young man, and then devoted themselves to preaching the gospel, traveling from place to place to do so. And in that time, especially in the years of Whitefield's early ministry, many people, multitudes really, responded to his preaching by putting their faith in Christ as multitudes had so responded long before in Corinth. The Lord had much people in those towns and cities where Whitefield, Wesley and others preached the gospel, thousands upon thousands as it turned out.

Moreover, in Whitefield's day, as in Paul's, there was opposition, sometimes ferocious opposition to the message being preached: that men were sinners and needed salvation, that eternal judgment beckoned to every human being, that only Jesus Christ could take our sins

away, that living faith in him – that is, belief, loyalty, commitment, love, and obedience all together – the sort of faith that transforms one’s life root and branch, *that faith* was what God requires of us in regard to his Son. And, often, as in Paul’s day, there was fierce opposition to the messengers themselves. Death threats, assassination attempts, violent disruptions of their meetings were commonplace.

And as in Paul’s day, the opposition to Whitefield and the other Awakening preachers came first and foremost from the church itself, clerics who should have rejoiced in the day of salvation but, jealous of the young preacher’s popularity, of the immense crowds who gathered to hear him, of the enthusiasm of his congregations, so unlike the staid unconcern and self-satisfaction of their own congregations, and themselves uninterested in the sort of whole-souled commitment to Christ that they preached, I say Christian ministers wrote against him, preached against him, and invoked the government to act against him, just as the Jews, who should have welcomed him and his message, did to Paul in Corinth. And yet God had many people in England and in America whom he planned to summon to faith and year after year they believed in the Lord as Whitefield and many others preached the gospel to them.

The Christian religion is a radical message that requires a fundamental *change* of life. As Thomas Boston the Scottish preacher who died just before the Awakening began in the 18th century, “We were once born sinners; we must be born again that we may become saints.” It requires a transformation of the deep spiritual structures of a person’s life, his or her dispositions, attitudes, loves, loyalties, and commitments; what the Bible calls “the heart.” In days of salvation such as those in Corinth during Paul’s ministry or in England and America in Whitefield’s day, that transformation was often sudden, dramatic, and frequent. Kidd’s narrative is full of accounts of men and women who went to hear Whitefield one sort of person and came away from him an hour or two later an utterly different person, a “new creation,” as Paul would later put it to these same Corinthians. *Such life changes were bound to be controversial and provoke resentment. They amounted to the public repudiation of the life others were living. People hate that!*

Sometimes in Whitefield’s day, the dramatic conversions they were witnessing day after day threw too much into the shade the more ordinary ways in which God’s grace transforms a person’s life, as we read here of the entire household of Crispus who came with him into the new faith. Infants, little children, spouses and slaves, were drawn to Christ in more gradual, less obvious ways, but just as surely. They too came to love him and to serve him. They too came to believe that they would live with him forever in heaven because of his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

And so it was in Whitefield’s day. People dramatically converted under his preaching nurtured their children in that same faith who then grew up to be faithful Christians themselves. Many of the Corinthians who became Christians did so as part of households. But what makes this history in Acts 19 so important is that it is the story of our Christian faith in the real world – the world in which you and I live today, the sinful world, the dying world, the corrupt world, the world that cannot solve any of its great problems - the story of the march of that faith, the story of the salvation of the people of God. That story continues today and in much the same way. It is our story, yours and mine, if we too have *believed in the Lord!* Corinth is today a ruin, has been for

many centuries. There is nothing there except some fallen columns and foundations. No one visits it today except tourists for an hour or two who want to see its ruins. The city is long gone and long since forgotten. But Crispus and his fellow believers are now with Christ in heaven! What matters in human history and so in the world today is the salvation of sinners, the calling of God's people from unbelief to faith. Everything else, I mean *everything else*, including all those things that consistently get more of our attention and more of our passion – from prosperity and poverty to terrorist strikes in Europe and the United States, to presidential politics—I say, all of that and so much more is detail!