

Gratitude and Service Acts 18:18-23

We saw that Paul had been given a revelation and promise from the Lord himself that no one would harm him in the city of Corinth, and then commanded him to preach that gospel message because he had many people in that city that had still not heard the message, but would respond because they have been chosen before the foundation of the earth. It is an amazing and encouraging message. And with that Paul continued on, even though the opposition kept rising. And then last day we saw the fruition of the promise given to Paul. How the Jews hauled Paul off before the governor of the whole region of Achaia — Gallio. Yet even though they thought he would rule in their favour, the providential hand of God he did the opposite. Paul went free and was allowed to preach Christ and the ruler of the synagogue was actually beaten.

And you can imagine after that whole scene how encouraged Paul was, and how much confidence he had in Christ. It emboldened him to preach Christ. And look at the beginning of verse 18, **“After this, Paul stayed many days longer.”** Notice those two first word — “After this.” After what? After the whole scene in front of Gallio. There was a new liberty. There was no threat of the Jews seizing him or even the Roman government. He could concentrate on the glorious mission of making and maturing of the disciples of Christ. What a blessing it is to have such a liberty from threat to preach and make known Jesus Christ. We often take it for granted, that we don’t have to worry about who is coming through the door, many do, but we can revel and concentrate on the glory of the One who purchased our redemption.

Now we come to verses 18-23 this morning, which are really interesting verses for a number of reasons. One is — why is there such little information about the travels and the places Paul visited? These verses cover an amazing 1500 miles in distance. Much of it by sea and by foot. It would have been arduous, and as he ministered, there would have been so many high and many lows, and yet none of it is recorded here in this Book of Acts. The other thing that stands out is this vow that Paul takes. It must have had some relevance. But why did he take a vow if all the Jewish regulations and sacrifices are null and void in Jesus Christ? And why would Luke even mention it? He gives us no information about it whatsoever in this passage. And certainly it has puzzled many Bible students and expository alike for centuries.

But God has this here for us for a reason, we need to seek to understand this passage in its context, and also in the wider scope of God’s redemptive workings and history. But there are two things that I think jump out at us in this passage regardless of the mystery. And they are gratitude and service. This is the thing. Both of them go together. As we see God’s hand and his faithfulness it spurs us not only to gratitude and thankfulness but to further service in our great God. Listen how the faithfulness of God

spurs us to trust and live for him in 2 Thessalonians 3:3-4, **“But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.”** We are established and guarded by God and therefore what is outcome is we live for him. Listen also to Hebrews 10:23, **“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”** Christ was faithful to Paul which caused him to hold fast and persevere. It led to joy-filled service to our great Lord. Also, 1 Peter 4:19, **“Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”** We are able to suffer well. We are able to serve him because he is faithful. He has not only sustaining us and will not let us go, but has caused us to keep serving and delighting in him.

And here is the thing — it is seeing his goodness, seeing his faithfulness in our lives. We are so good at seeing the faults of others, or the suffering in our lives, and even the struggles to follow him, but how often are we looking and seeing and revelling in the God who is always faithful to us? Think of your struggles, where do you see God’s faithfulness? The more we see his presence and character in our lives through his word, the more we are not only thankful but he promises greater grace for today and tomorrow. And the more we desire and want to serve him. And this is what you see in Paul’s life. So I hope to see a couple things this morning that will help us live with gratitude that will spur us to greater confidence and service for Christ in looking at this passage. I hope it will be a blessing to us.

1. We need to see the gratitude of Paul to God. V.18.

There are two ways as believers where we don’t cultivate a heart of gratitude and joy, but cultivate bitterness and hopelessness in our lives. One is that we just do know God and his promises that he has made to us. Isn’t it true? Think about it — how many promises do you know of God? Certainly we know he has forgiven us and we will one day be with him. But how many promises can you name and count? Remember, God is faithful. But what does that mean? It means he is faithful to his person and his character. It means that he is faithful to his word and every single promise he has made to us. So when I say that God is faithful to me I should be able to explain what that means. He is faithful to forgive me when I mess up. He is faithful to give the grace in whatever he has called me to go through. He is faithful to cause me to persevere. He is faithful with his constant presence. He is faithful to cause all things to work for my good and his glory. He is faithful even to help me pass through the valley of the shadow of death. He is faithful in all his promises he has made to you and me. As I go through trial and tribulation I should be able to say there is a promise for that! There is grace for that particular trial or obstacle! And seeing that creates gratitude rather than bitterness. So often we are bitter or hopeless because we don’t know his promises.

And here is the second thing we fail to do so we don't cultivate gratitude and joy but bitterness is we do not rehearse the promises we know. Think if Paul was so consumed with being hauled before Gallio, and the great affront of the Jews. Think if he filled his heart with this was going to happen again and again. Think if he kept saying this is not fair and kept concentrating on his own worth. I can't take this. Do you really think he would keep on ministering? What caused him to continue many days? He filled his mind with not only the promises of God but also how those promises were fulfilled in his life before Gallio and the Jews. It preached one glorious message in his life — God is so faithful! God will never leave me and has not deserted me. Oh, how I can trust in this One who keeps on gracing me!

So here the question — do you know the promises that are ours in Christ? Look at recent trying time you might have gone through in your life. Did God give you the grace to come through it? Was He faithful? Here is a verse that all of us might know in 1 Corinthians 10:13, **“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”** God is faithful. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to endure but will give the necessary grace to follow and love him. How many times do we see this promise and God's faithfulness come to pass in our lives?

Paul recognized the goodness and grace of God, and was overwhelmed by his graciousness. So with this in mind, look at verse 18 and at the heart of Paul, **“After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.”** We see that Paul when he departed, he took Priscilla and Aquila with him. He must have had such a strong relationship with them, and they were certainly devoted to Christ and the mission of Paul that they came along with him. Cenchreae was the port at Corinth, and the place where they sailed.

Now the strange part of this whole scene is that Paul shaved his hair because we read that he placed himself under a vow. And the reason why this is strange is this is something related to Judaism. Paul related all the things he held dear to him as far as being a faithful Jew before conversion in Philippians 3:5-7, **“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”** These are things he counted to have earned him status before God. But listen to what he says next in Philippians 3:7-8, **“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”** I count them as all garbage for the sake of

Christ. Jesus really has accomplished all. He is my confidence and glory! He is my righteousness. I come with no merit.

So why the vow? Certainly this was an optional thing and was not to prove righteousness, and something Paul could do as a Jew, and I believe it expressed his gratitude to God and his desire to be wholly given over to him. I believe in context it expresses his deep love for God for his faithfulness in all of the adversities that he face in Corinth. It was a way of honouring God in his Jewish tradition. There was nothing meritorious here. And what this vow is — is a Nazarite vow. John MacArthur writes about this, **“The vow Paul made was a Nazirite vow—a special pledge of separation and devotion to God (cf. 2 Cor. 6:17). It was usually made in gratitude to the Almighty for gracious blessing or deliverance.”**

Listen to Numbers 6:2-5, **“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins. All the days of his vow of separation, no razor shall touch his head. Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. He shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long.”** So there were three things that a man did, and that is he would not cut his hair, not drink alcohol, and he would not eat anything of the vine. Now at the end of that vow he would shave his hair, and then present his hair along with an offering before the Lord, and they were burnt together. The Jews made provision for those who were away from Jerusalem that they had thirty days after shaving their head to present this offering before God.

So one of the goals of his leaving Corinth was to present this offering as f thanks giving in Jerusalem before God. And you can see that in verse 22 of our text, **“When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch.”** Caesarea was known as Palestine, and from there pilgrims would land and go to Jerusalem. And the language is indicative of this. Since Jerusalem was on a hill you “went up” there and then when you left you “went down” to wherever you were going. So even though Jerusalem is not mentioned, the ancient reader would know what church he was talking about, and where Paul ended up before reporting back to Antioch which brought a close to his second mission trip.

But here is the thing, Paul was overwhelmed with the goodness and grace and faithfulness of Christ in his life. And maybe he took this vow right after the events before Gallio. But here is the thing — he saw the hand of God in the events and trials of his life. How did he notice the hand of God? Because he had the revelation of God. He had the specific promises of God that no one would hurt him, and that others would come to Christ. Think of it

because we have those promises — there is nothing that anyone can ever do that has not been ordained of God against us. Nothing or no one can separate us from our Lord. Others are still coming to Christ and will praise him for all of eternity through the efforts of God's people and witness. Paul is overwhelmed with the goodness of God, and he wants to express that delight to God but he wants others to know as well his thankfulness. And his life and through this vow would have been a walking billboard of the faithfulness of God.

We are so good at complaining, but how good are we praising? How often are we looking to our Lord who promised he would never leave us or forsake us, and here we are this morning? Here is the faithfulness of Christ even when we have been faithless this week. Here is the incredible thing — the more we rehearse his specific grace in our hearts and lives, the more we recognize there is still so much more grace, and the more we realize that, the more we want to serve and make much of him. And you see that in Paul.

2. We need to see the joyful work of Paul for God. Vv. 19-23 (19-20)

We often say whatever is in our heart will find its way out. Many think they can be hypocrites, and sometimes they can play a part for a little while, but more often than not their hopes, desires, dreams, wants — their heart — comes out. Here, Paul as he makes his way to Jerusalem cannot help but share his heart and joy, and no doubt the faithfulness of God and strengthen the brethren in the faith of Christ. Paul comes to Ephesus which is the most important city in Asia Minor. He left Priscilla and Aquila there to carry on the mission work. But while he was there he kept preaching Jesus Christ — making known the truth of the gospel, reasoning with the Jews through the Scriptures that Jesus truly is the Christ. You can imagine the exuberance of the Ephesians. They like the Bereans want him to stay longer, but he departs and says he will return if the Lord wills. Listen to verse 21, **“But on taking leave of them he said, ‘I will return to you if God wills,’ and he set sail from Ephesus.”** I love how dependant he is on God. He wants to return but he realizes ultimately someone else is writing his story. If the Lord wills is all over our lives whether we realize it or not.

Now we almost might think that Paul should have stayed, but he leaves. Now why does he leave? Now there is a variation of this text in other manuscripts that give a fuller description, such as in the KJV version. Verse 21 reads in that, **“But bade them farewell, saying, I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem: but I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus.”** Notice he has to make this feast, and why? Because of the Nazarite vow and the offering his desires and delights to present. Because of his gratitude and thankfulness to his great God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Now, whether this rendering was in the original or not is up for debate, but the expositors back then and today all agree on this — the reason Paul's did not stay in Ephesus was because of his vow and the gratitude in his heart.

Now think of Paul's gratitude and vow, and his determination to honour God out of love. This has nothing to do with merit. He is determined to travel that 1500 miles in a short space of time. And think of the determination to honour Christ because we can be so up and down. We can say, after all the Lord has done, after all his faithfulness, I want to grow my relationship with him, I want to honour him with my heart and life. We might be committed to coming out to church, or daily Bible time and prayer, or being a godly example to your children, or being an exemplary husband and wife. All to the glory of God. And here comes the obstacles. He comes the time pressure. He comes the "I just don't want to" of our hearts. And we so easily forsake that commitment. Do you think it was easy for Paul to even leave the encouragement of what is taking place at Ephesus or the thriving community at Corinth? What kept him going? The whole reason he made his vow. Christ not only saved him but has been with him every step of the way, guiding and protecting. He is and has been faithful. He keeps his eyes and his heart full of the truth about this all loving Saviour fresh in his heart and life. When our life is stale there is always this in common — Jesus and his word and promises have been at a distance. Oh, how we need to fill our hearts with his greatness, faithfulness, and love to us. How fickle our hearts when we don't. How low our commitment.

Now look at the conclusion of this journey and the beginning of another, and if we would just realize the extent of the distance and effort of these few verses we would be exhausted. Luke records, **"When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples."** Even if Jerusalem is not mentioned in the text, it is clear again that this is where he was headed. He needed to go there in order to fulfill his vow. There he greeted the church. No doubt sees James and others, and then he returns to Antioch where he began way back in chapter 15:40-41. Wow, can you imagine all that he shared about what the Lord had accomplished through his feeble hands in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth. It must have been thrilling to hear, and the main emphasis would not be Paul but would be the Lord and what he has done and is doing to build his church in which even the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

And we think, Paul put your feet up. Rest awhile! Let someone take over the reins. You certainly have done enough and been through enough. I think of all of us feel that way at times. We look at all the difficulties and trials we have been through whether in ministry or just in life and we would love to just retire or leave all of that behind. People run away from churches, families and there lives all the time. And the reason why they do is because of the problems and difficulties. And here is the thing I hope we know — none of us have ever had any trials and heartache or suffering that even comes close to Paul. And yet he does not stay at in the safe and easy confines of Antioch with these believers who love him and know him, but he is back at it

as they say. He begins to revisit some of the churches of his first mission trip. This would have included places like Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch.

But what made him keep going? It wasn't because he had a restless spirit and could never keep still. Some have such a discontentment that they are always looking for something different. No, he knew the calling of God in his life, and the thing that kept him going was not will-power, and determination, but his heart and eyes were on the one who not only purchased his redemption, but who is forever with him and who is forever faithful. We do not trust, and usually do not have warm feelings or are drawn towards those who have proven to be unreliable or unfaithful, but every word of our Lord to us is yea and amen! He is faithful. As you read and look at his word every single week, as you meditate on life and how God and his word intersect with your life aren't you amazed at his grace and faithfulness to a sinner like you? Can you really be described as a thankful person? Or is it more accurate to call you a pessimist or even an angry person? Angry people are angry because they have not gotten what they deserve. God and others have not been good.

We are here this morning because Jesus truly is all good and all faithful and will not let us go. We are here because we have not gotten what we deserve. And you can tell if you are a thankful person, because whatever is inside will come out. And here is how it comes out — through making much of Jesus. Serving him and others for the cause of Christ is not a burden or a curse but a joy and privilege because we want him to be known and delighted in just as we delight in him. Here is my plea — fill your mind with his word and promises. See how God really intersects with you life, and it cannot help but create gratitude and joy, and that will produce service for the glory of Christ. Our Jesus really is faithful!