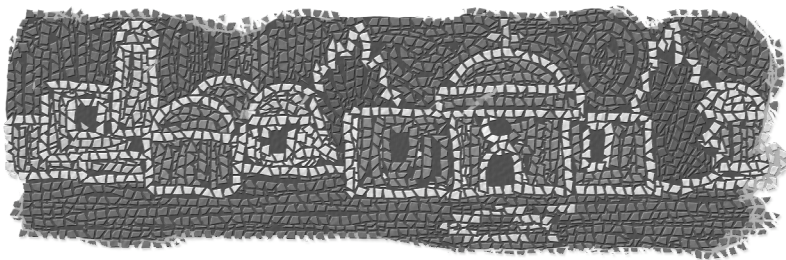


The Church at Ephesus



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 19, 20:17-38.*

Memory Text: “So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed” (*Acts 19:20, NKJV*).

The Ephesian church was fortunate to have had the ministry of Paul. Imagine—Paul as your minister? What a blessing! It needed a Paul too. The church itself had many enemies, some as ferocious as wild beasts (*1 Cor. 15:32*), and this explains all the more Paul's closeness to the Ephesian congregation. No wonder his ministry there was long and arduous, but when he left, he did so with the satisfaction that would be the envy of any pastor: “I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (*Acts 20:27, NIV*).

Among others associated with the church were Aquila and Priscilla, Apollos, Timothy, and the apostle John. Each of them had a role to play in the building of this church, one of the finest of the first century. What can we learn as we delve into this fascinating and instructive moment in early Christian history?

The Week at a Glance: What kind of culture did Paul face in Ephesus? What really motivated much of the opposition against him? Who were Aquila and Priscilla? What was the secret of Apollos's power? What was the essence of Paul's farewell address to the Ephesians?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 1.*

Ephesus: Jesus v. Diana *(Acts 19:24-29)*

Located at the western edge of Asia Minor, with easy access to the Aegean Sea, Ephesus was at the height of its glory in the first and second centuries A.D. The fourth-largest city of the Roman Empire, the capital of Asia Minor, Ephesus boasted of a rich heritage of wealth, philosophy, and Roman law.

Perhaps the most attractive point about the city was its temple of Diana, the goddess of fertility whom “all Asia and the world” worshiped (*Acts 19:27*). Known as Artemis to the Greeks and Diana to the Romans, the goddess had a cult of followers who practiced magic and astrology; the worship of this figure also brought to the city a flood of worshipers and tourists. Built of marble and lined with gold, her temple measured 324x164 feet and held in the center of its inner sanctuary the image of Diana. During Paul’s time the temple was considered one of the seven wonders of the world, and the city’s commerce, industry, and economy depended on the multitudes flocking there to worship Diana.

Into this city, absorbed with the worship of the deity of fertility, entered Paul proclaiming, “ ‘they are not gods which are made with hands’ ” (*Acts 19:26, NKJV*). In other words, his message struck at the heart of all that these people held dear.

Read Acts 19:24-28. What was the real issue that caused the people to react against the truth as they did?

The conflict between Christ and Diana is as old as the conflict between Christ and Satan. The war is not always about what is right and wrong or about who offers the good life and who does not. The conflict is an appeal to the immediate as opposed to the eternal, to the emotional as opposed to the spiritual, to the pleasures of life as opposed to salvation from sin.

At Ephesus the two stood in confrontation. Paul was on one side, Demetrius on the other, and both were appealing in the name of religion. That raises a point we can forget only at our peril: We confront an Ephesus at every corner, and that includes our own hearts.

Read again the argument made against Paul and his faith. Notice how his opponents justified their opposition so that it appeared their concerns weren’t just about their own livelihood but about something greater than themselves. In what ways do we do the same thing, making excuses for what we do on the pretext of some cause greater than ourselves when, in the end, our real and immediate concern is only ourselves?

Ephesus: Aquila and Priscilla

Paul's first visit to Ephesus was a brief one, at the close of his second missionary journey, en route from Corinth to Antioch on the way to Jerusalem. While in Corinth, he met Aquila and Priscilla. The three had much in common: They were Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah. They had traveled quite a bit—Paul on mission, the couple on business. They were refugees—the couple driven from Rome and Paul from many cities. And they all were tentmakers.

Forged out of necessity, born out of love for Jesus, and burdened with sharing the gospel, the threesome made an effective team ministry. After witnessing in Corinth, the three went to Ephesus (*Acts 18:19*). There Paul preached his first sermon (as his custom was) to Jews in the local synagogue. His audience was so impressed that they requested him to stay longer, but he declined, promising, “‘I will return . . . God willing’” (*vs. 21, NKJV*). The apostle must have sensed the potential of Ephesus to become a great Christian center, and so he left Aquila and Priscilla behind. The two faithful laypersons became instrumental in the establishment of the early believers at Ephesus. Later, when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (c. A.D. 57) from Ephesus, he sends the Corinthian church greetings from Priscilla and Aquila and the church that met in their house (*1 Cor. 16:19*). The lay couple and the church at Ephesus have left us a meaningful role model in lay ministry, particularly that of team ministry.

Read the following passages that refer to Aquila and Priscilla: **Acts 18:2, 3, 18, 19; 1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:3, 4.** From these texts, what can you learn about the characteristics essential for Christian life and ministry?

Aquila and Priscilla were a blessing, not only to the Ephesus church but also to the early missionary movement in that they brought Apollos to the full knowledge of truth (*Acts 18:26*). Consequently, the early church gained an eloquent, educated, cultured, and fearless preacher in Apollos.

Reread Romans 16:3, 4. How many people would you be willing to risk your life for? For what causes would you endanger your life? Mull over your answers. What conclusions can you draw from them about yourself?

Apollos at Ephesus *(Acts 18:24-28)*

In this account, we have a Jew who is named after a Greek god. What's a subtle but important message for us in this fact? See also Dan. 1:7.

Even before Paul began his full-fledged ministry at Ephesus, the church there was exposed to Apollos, a brilliant orator from Alexandria, the second most important city in the Roman Empire. A Jew from that great center of Greek learning, he was highly cultured and learned in philosophy and rhetoric and knew the Scriptures well (*Acts 18:24*). But what is culture without conviction? And what is conviction without a passion to persuade others toward what one is convinced about?

Read the account of Apollos in Acts 18:24-28. What things are expressed there that reveal why he was so powerful an evangelist?

Despite all that he had going for him, Aquila and Priscilla detected a deficiency in Apollos's message. Evidently "he knew only the baptism of John" (*Acts 18:25, NKJV*), not the baptism of Jesus. The Baptist himself knew the difference: One was of water, the other was of the " 'Holy Spirit and fire' " (*Matt. 3:11, NKJV*). It is not enough to go through the ritual of baptism. A ritual has no saving power. It is only a symbol of something deeper and greater. John spoke of repentance from sin, and this was only the first step. The whole gospel calls us to repent and believe in Jesus—His death and resurrection—and be transformed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This Apollos did not know, and Aquila and Priscilla "took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (*Acts 18:26, NKJV*).

The church at Ephesus, thus, early in its beginnings, not only had the benefit of a great scholar expounding the Scriptures but also became the venue of turning this scholar into a true disciple of Christ.

Apparently, among his other attributes, Apollos was able to receive instruction and correction. Why is being open to correction so important for any Christian? When was the last time someone attempted to correct you on something? How did you respond? How can you learn to accept needed correction better?

Paul at Ephesus (*Acts 19:1-20*)

During Paul's third missionary journey he kept the promise he made to the Ephesians (*Acts 18:21*) and returned to the great city where he spent about three years preaching and establishing a strong church. "All who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (*19:10, NKJV*). Note the phrase *Jews and Greeks*. The church at Ephesus was a mixed congregation that provides the backdrop for the joy and celebration of unity and relationships the Epistle to the Ephesians speaks so much about.

Paul's ministry in the city began on the right note: bringing the fullness of truth to some of the believers who were already there. As in the case of Apollos, these believers had the baptism of John but not of Jesus and had not even "heard whether there is a Holy Spirit" (*vss. 1-3, NKJV*). Paul, great teacher that he was, quickly gave them more light, which they readily accepted.

Paul's ministry there, however, did meet with opposition. Thus, even such a great evangelist couldn't reach all hearts. How did he respond to that opposition? Why do you think he did what he did?

Despite the obstinacy of some (*vs. 9*), both Greeks and Jews throughout the province of Asia heard the Lord's message. Paul taught and preached daily for over two years, and God performed "unusual miracles" through him (*vs. 11, NKJV*).

Results of Paul's preaching and healing ministry were astounding. Many believed, confessed their sins, and turned from their past ways of magic and sorcery. The world of the occult was shattered, and the city had a bonfire of incantation books worth several million dollars (*vss. 18, 19*). Most important of all, the "word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (*vs. 20, NKJV*). Even as "the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified" (*vs. 17, NKJV*), the city was gripped with fear that "Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed" (*vs. 27, NKJV*).

Read verses 18 and 19. Look at what their new faith cost these people. What has your faith cost you? Look inside your heart. What do you need to put on the bonfire?

The Depth of Paul's Ministry (*Acts 20:17-38*)

After serving in Ephesus for three years, the apostle left on a mission to Macedonia, Greece, and Troas, and then planned his return trip to Jerusalem. The boat's itinerary included a stop in Miletus, some thirty miles from Ephesus. Paul summoned the Ephesian church elders to Miletus for a farewell fellowship. Of all the churches Paul established and visited, Ephesus was very close and special to him. His depth of love and commitment to that church is seen in the farewell address in Acts 20:18-35.

Note the following about Paul's ministry and then give a reason why each is important to ministry:

- 1. His life was as transparent as his ministry** (*vs. 18*).
- 2. He ministered with heartfelt sincerity** (*vs. 19*).
- 3. He spoke of the truth both publicly and privately** (*vs. 20*).
- 4. He had one common message to both Jews and Greeks: faith in Jesus** (*vs. 21*).
- 5. In his life, service came before self** (*vss. 24-26*).
- 6. He declared the whole counsel of God** (*vs. 27*).
- 7. He delegated responsibility for shepherding the flock and warned of the dangers in ministry** (*vss. 28-31*).
- 8. He believed that the church was purchased by Christ's own blood** (*vs. 28*).
- 9. He believed in supporting himself** (*vss. 33-35*).

Paul left the Ephesian church under the stewardship of competent elders (*vs. 17*). The apostle also appointed Timothy to minister there, with a special commission to ensure that the Ephesians "teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith" (*1 Tim. 1:3, 4, NKJV*).

The Ephesian church also had the privilege of the ministry and counsel of the beloved disciple John (see Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 194). The early church father Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 130–200) wrote of John's residence in Ephesus from where he wrote the Gospel (*Against Heresies*, 2.22.5; 3.1.1). The elderly disciple's presence itself must have been a source of great strength and joy to the church at Ephesus.

Read prayerfully Paul's farewell address to the Ephesians in Acts 20:18-35. What points touch you the most? Write out a paragraph on that point or points: what it is, how it touches you, what you have learned from it, and how, if applied, this could better your life and enhance your walk with the Lord.

Further Study: Read Revelation 2:1-7. Note God’s commendations and warnings to the church at Ephesus. How relevant are these to you and your local church?

Read *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 281–297. Note the great challenges Ephesus posed to evangelism.

“Through their [Priscilla’s and Aquila’s] teachings he [Apollos] obtained a clearer understanding of the Scriptures, and became one of the ablest defenders of the Christian church. Thus a thorough scholar and brilliant orator learned the way of the Lord more perfectly from the teachings of a Christian man and woman whose humble employment was that of tentmaking.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1063.

“The magicians of heathen times have their counterpart in the spiritualistic mediums, the clairvoyants, and the fortunetellers of today. . . . Could the veil be lifted from before our eyes, we should see evil angels employing all their arts to deceive and to destroy.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 290.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Every age and individual faces the same struggle: Diana or Christ. What kinds of “Diana” are prevalent in your society? How can you, as a church, help others see clearly the two issues? Also, how can you, as a class, help others within the church not be slowly swept into the worship of “Diana,” in whatever form she comes?
- 2** Have someone in the class read aloud Paul’s farewell address to the Ephesians in Acts 20:18-35 and then, as a class, discuss whatever comes to your minds about his words.
- 3** Read again about those who burned all their books (see Wednesday’s lesson). Wasn’t that a little extreme (after all, burning books)? What message can we glean from their actions? Ask people in the class to share their own experiences of having had to “burn” something for the Lord: What was it? Why did they believe they had to do it? Are they sorry or glad they did it?

Bedside Evangelistic Series

by NATASHA YUNAK

It was an ordinary day, the kind we seldom remember until something unexpected happens. On Saturday evening as I prepared to bathe my two-month-old son, Florin, I noticed a lump on his body. We called the doctor, who told us to take Florin to the regional hospital in Tula, Russia, an eight-hour train ride away.

“Why Lord?” I prayed over and over as we made our way to the hospital and as we waited anxiously for the doctor to examine our son.

The doctor told us our son’s condition was not serious but that he needed surgery, which he had scheduled for two days later. He urged me to remain in the hospital with Florin and complete necessary paperwork while my husband returned home.

I was taken to a ward where other mothers waited with their children for surgery. I unpacked my bag and laid my Bible on the stand near the bed. One woman noticed the Bible and began asking questions. As I answered her questions, I noticed the other mothers were listening too. We talked for two hours about God, the Bible, and life. Then she asked for some Christian books to read. When the other women heard her request, they, too, asked for books. “And bring children’s books, too,” they added.

The next day my husband brought a box of books, which the women eagerly grabbed. The children’s ward became eerily silent as each mother began reading. Suddenly I understood that God had a purpose for our son’s unexpected emergency and was turning a crisis into a blessing. Every woman in the ward needed assurance of God’s love, and through us God was providing that assurance.

Later I invited the children to come and sing with me. I taught them songs of faith in Jesus. The mothers joined in with us as we sang. The dreary hospital ward was filled with songs of joy. The nurses heard the singing and came to see what was happening. Doctors and nurses from other wards stopped by. Some asked for books.

My son’s surgery was successful, and soon he was well enough to return home. I do not know how many people’s lives were changed as the result of our bedside evangelistic series, but I am just glad that God could use us in a surprising and unexpected way.

NATASHA YUNAK and her family live in western Russia.