

A STAR IS BORN

ACTS 18:18-28 SEPTEMBER 23, 2020

Researchers, like those at the University of Calgary, estimate that each year 150 billion new stars are born in our universe.¹ Closer to home, NASA calculates that the Milky Way Galaxy is producing about a half dozen new stars each year.² Dr. Roland Diehl, a physicist that studies these sorts of things, says: “Our galaxy isn't the biggest producer of stars...in the universe, but there's still plenty of activity.”³

In our text tonight, we might say a star is born. He's not a *major* character in the New Testament, but he's one we remember - Apollos, the silver-tongued preacher who would ultimately do a great amount of work and find his name listed among church leaders like Paul and Peter. He shined brightly for the Lord in Asia Minor and Greece and I'm sure many other places.

But, what we find in our verses is that he was just *one* individual being used by God - one star in a growing constellation of Christians who were shining the light of the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. So much of Acts is dedicated to the movements of Paul and what God accomplished through him. Tonight, he's on the move again. In fact, this is one of those sections where Luke covers a huge amount of ground in a very small number of words. Paul's second missionary journey ends in verse 22 but Luke moves on to his third journey already in verse 23.

But it's not just about Paul. Throughout the story we see others in each place. As we read, there's a theme of brotherhood and connection. We see the Christian family cooperating and expanding, but also people growing in their faith and their understanding and usefulness. The second half of Acts is largely about Paul but it's not *only* about Paul. Because the Church isn't a basketball team, where you have a few superstars and then a few other guys and then support staff and then that's the end of the list. The Church is a *family* and every one of us who is a Christian, whether we've just been born into the faith a few days ago or have been in it for 80 years, each of us is a part of what God is doing, a light shining in the darkness of our world.

So, let's get into it, starting at verse 18. When we left off, Paul had spent at least a year and a half in the Greek city of Corinth.

Acts 18:18 - ¹⁸After staying for some time, Paul said farewell to the brothers and sisters and sailed away to Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. He shaved his head at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken.

It was unusual for Paul to be able to spend so much time in one place. Sometimes he was only in a city for a few days before having to run for his life. But his long stay with the Corinthians had come to an end. Why? We don't know for sure, other than that God's call on Paul's life was not to stay planted in one place, but to go here and there as a mobile preacher of grace. The timing was up to the Holy Spirit. And we'll see in these verses that Paul was sensitive to the will of God when it came to *when* he stayed somewhere and when he moved on. We're reminded of that comforting but significant phrase in Psalm 31:15, “My times are in [His] hands.” Other translations say it this way: “The course of my life is in your power,” (CSB) or “My future is in Your hands.” (NLT)

¹ http://ism.ucalgary.ca/Star_Formation/How_Often.html

² https://www.nasa.gov/centers/goddard/news/topstory/2006/milkyway_seven.html

³ *ibid.*

We notice, right from the start, that family feel. Paul said farewell to them as “brothers and sisters.” And though these Christians in Corinth would later be a cause of heart hurt for him, he always thought of them as family.

We see that Paul’s friends Priscilla and Aquila came with him. We talked about this couple a bit last time, but let’s focus in on this: Going with Paul, they had to close up shop again and step out into the unknown. They had already been driven out of Rome. They had to start all over there in Corinth. And now, they found themselves on a ship sailing again. I doubt that they were able to take all their tools and inventory to make for a soft landing in Syria. But they did it for the Lord and the Gospel. It’s a very good thing they did, but it certainly wouldn’t have made financial sense at the time.

Jesus once said:

Matthew 10:29-30 - “I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, ³⁰ will receive now in return a hundred times as many houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property—along with persecution. And in the world to come that person will have eternal life.”

Now what about this *vow*? My, oh my do commentators get into a tizzy. First there’s the argument over whether Luke is speaking about Paul or Aquila shaving his head. Then there’s the argument over what *kind* of vow it was. Some say it was a Nazarite vow, others say it wasn’t. Some say it was an act of profound thankfulness to God, others say it was a failure in Paul’s life. One commentator we really love calls it a “deliberate sin” and believes this to be “the beginning of the end for Paul.”⁴

We simply don’t know what this vow was about. It seems pretty clear that Luke had Paul as the subject. But we’re given no consequential or editorial data about this act. Paul wasn’t a *perfect* man. He called himself the chief of sinners, after all. But we also know that he was, at times, the lone defender of the Gospel of grace. He was the champion of Christian *liberty* from the Law of Moses.

Rather than argue the merits, since we simply don’t have all the information, for me it was a good reminder that Paul had a deep and active *personal* relationship with the Lord. It wasn’t *all* public. He had more than a theological relationship with God or professional exercise of his Christianity. He was speaking to His Lord one on one. Being moved to acts of devotion that we’ll never know about. Things that didn’t have to do with his official job in the church. He was growing all the time and we want to be Christians like that.

Acts 18:19 - ¹⁹When they reached Ephesus he left them there, but he himself entered the synagogue and debated with the Jews.

We learn in Romans that there was already an established church in Cenchræe and so the trio hop over to the city of Ephesus. Paul is in a hurry, but he sets aside a morning to go and preach to some of his countrymen. Hopefully we’re never *too* busy to do ministry when the opportunity arises. Paul isn’t going to stay, but he had time to do the work of an evangelist that Saturday.

We’re told he “left” Priscilla and Aquila there. We don’t have all the conversations, but it reads as though Paul directed them to stay. We remember that Paul had apostolic authority and this faithful,

⁴ Donald Grey Barnhouse *Acts*

Christian couple were willing to submit to his leadership, even though he *may* have started out as their employee and even though some scholars think that Priscilla was a member of nobility. They were humble and flexible and, because of that, they're going to be very useful in a little bit.

Acts 18:20-21 - ²⁰When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he declined, ²¹but he said farewell and added, "I'll come back to you again, if God wills." Then he set sail from Ephesus.

It must have been a strange sensation for Paul to be *asked* to stay. That's not how it usually happened. But in his decision we see a good snapshot of his ministry mindset. First of all, if Paul was *numbers* oriented, he would've stayed. Ephesus is a big city, an important city. Conventional wisdom would say 'strike while the iron's hot.' But Paul said no. He wasn't motivated by numbers of followers or those sorts of metrics that are so prevalent in Church culture today. We also see that he believed God should set the course of ministry. His goal was not to hit a certain number of cities per year or plant a certain number of churches, but simply to be in God's will. Because, third, he *trusted* God to do what was right and best in each of these places. God had a heart for Ephesus. So did Paul, but not as much as God. So he was content to allow the Master to send him out into the harvest into whatever corners and avenues of the vineyard that the Master saw fit.

Acts 18:22 - ²²On landing at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church, then went down to Antioch.

Luke covers a lot of ground here. Surely, each of these stops would've included great stories of God's power. But that's not the Holy Spirit's focus in these verses. Instead we're seeing place after place that either a work is getting started or there are established Christians living out their faith.

We started in Corinth where there were many believers whose lives had been dramatically transformed. Then to Cenchreae where a church had been started. On to Ephesus where something new was just beginning and Christian operatives were left to get things up and running. To Caesarea where people like Philip the Evangelist lived and Cornelius with his household. Preachers and saints ministering to the soldiers of Rome and the people on the coast. To Jerusalem where there were apostles and many others who walked with Jesus. Then to Antioch, Paul's home church, full of faith and prayer and mission. A blend of Jews and Gentiles all together in the family of God.

In the darkness of the world, everywhere we turn we see constellations of believers lighting up. New stars being born, others shining as brightly as ever. Not because there was 1 man doing something, but countless people all functioning as the Body of Christ wherever they found themselves.

Paul had been out in the wider world, but his friends at Antioch had kept the light on for him. The same was happening in each place that he went to and would go *back* to starting in verse 23.

Acts 18:23 - ²³After spending some time there, he set out, traveling through one place after another in the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

No record of Paul getting to some place where there had been a church planted and it being a ghost town. They all kept the light on. And were ready to be built up and strengthened by Paul when he came. And this was a welcome and necessary work. As Matthew Poole wrote: "*though the seed be duly sown, yet it must be seasonably watered.*"

That's not only true for Galatians and Phrygians, but for Hanfordite and Lemoorons as well. Once transformed by the power of Gospel we can then go on being strengthened and built up, able to bear more, endure more, accomplish more in the power of God. Paul was a great evangelist, but he also made it his business to reinforce the faith of Christians. That's a necessary part of the Christian life. And we see that playing out in our remaining verses.

Acts 18:24-25 - ²⁴Now a Jew named Apollos, a native Alexandrian, an eloquent man who was competent in the use of the Scriptures, arrived in Ephesus. ²⁵He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately about Jesus, although he knew only John's baptism.

So here we have a remarkable, Egyptian man. He was Jewish by nationality but had become a believer in Jesus, though he had, apparently, not heard of Jesus' death and resurrection, not to mention Pentecost. He's described as eloquent, competent, fervent and accurate. That's a pretty good stat sheet. One resource said it like this: He had a lot to say and he said it well.⁵ But, despite his many gifts, he was incomplete. But that's ok, because God had positioned others right where they needed to be in order to build him up and complete what was lacking in his knowledge.

Acts 18:26 - ²⁶He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. After Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately.

So, we're told in verse 25 that he had been speaking and teaching accurately about Jesus, and now in verse 26 it was explained to him *more* accurately. And I love that, because it shows that we don't have to wait to preach until we have a PhD in theology, or until we have an entire Gospel memorized or anything like that. If you are a Christian, you know enough about God to *become* a Christian. And you don't need to wait to tell people about Jesus. But, at the same time, all of us have room to grow in our accuracy and understanding and knowledge of the Scriptures. In that synagogue, Apollos was probably the smartest guy in the room. But it was two refugee laborers who would fill him in on what he was missing. So, while we have a green light to go and preach the Gospel, we've got to be sure we stay meek and humble and recognize that we do not know everything. We need to continue to be instructed in the Word of God and by His Holy Spirit. We want to become *more* accurate all the time. Like one of those flashlights that you can focus the zoom. If you're in a dark room, I'm glad to have a flashlight of any kind. But even better to have one that is bright, accurate, able to be focused into a highly directional beam.

Now, before we move on, I'd like to commend the bravery we're seeing here. There's a lot of Christian courage in this verse. You've got Apollos, standing up in boldness to preach all that he knew. He obviously didn't have every answer about Jesus, but he wasn't going to shy away. We also see great bravery from Priscilla and Aquila. They were in the synagogue too, and they would've known what sort of things could happen to Christians in situations like this.

Their example reminds us that the Christian life is one of grace and kindness and tact, but also bravery. You're commanded by God to get into the fight. To respond to the spiritual crisis this world is in. We can't just stay home all the time and hope there's a Paul out there somewhere. Because there's a whole group of people right in front of us who are in desperate need of the Gospel.

⁵ Vincent's Word Studies

Acts 18:27-28 - ²⁷When he wanted to cross over to Achaia, the brothers and sisters wrote to the disciples to welcome him. After he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. ²⁸For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating through the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah.

There's no hint of jealousy or turf war or anything like that in any of this. They're all family together. Brothers and sisters. All working together. Building each other up. Cooperating and communicating. And we see that Apollos did a couple of things: First, he didn't just breeze in and out on his own whims. He's connected himself with the church and he's working with them in his desire to go over to Achaia. He's not just a lone gunman doing whatever he wants.

We also see that he used the gifts he had. Now, on the human level, he had a lot of gifts. Eloquence and intelligence and charisma. Sometimes we slip into a mistaken mindset that since God loves to use the foolish things of this world that must mean He *NEVER* uses smart people or well-spoken people. That's not true. He'll use anyone who is submitted to Him. And Apollos put his skills and gifts into the hands of God and allowed them to be used for ministry. When Jesus was looking for ingredients, one boy came and said "I've got five loaves and two fish." Another time someone had seven loaves. Apollos used his oratory, Lydia used her home. Priscilla and Aquila used their business. Dorcas used her sewing kit. David used his harp and his sling. What gifts and abilities do you have? God can use them. And He *does* use them. It's not just hypothetical. Ivor Powell writes, "If Priscilla and Aquila had not been present the church may have lost one of its greatest evangelists."⁶

But there they were. Living a life of grace and courage. A life that cared about the proper understanding of the Scriptures. One that didn't divide from people but which welcomed them and reached out to them. And as we see Paul moving north and west we see Apollos and others moving out in other directions. Apollos became a great help to Christians in Achaia who needed to be built up and strengthened just as *he* had needed to be built up and strengthened. And more and more lights were born in place after place. Connected in the family of God by the love of Christ.

When we look up certain stars seem larger or shine brighter. Some are much larger than others, some are just closer to us. The truth is, no matter the size, *all* of them declare God's glory. And though many pass off the scene, year after year others are born and take their place in the night sky. The Church is like that. What started 2,000 years ago continues today. From the human vantage point, our lives may end up seeming like a luminous supergiant or maybe more like a yellow dwarf. But even the smallest of lives can be an amazing part of God's work. Whatever the size of our ministry, whatever our orbit, we can keep the light on, continue growing in brightness and heat and constancy, and be a part of the spiritual birth of others who are currently trapped in darkness.

⁶ Ivor Powell *The Amazing Acts*