

I. Introduction

Good morning! A newborn baby depends on his or her mother for everything. But as the months and years go by, the child grows and becomes more independent until becoming an adult. In a similar way, when we become Christians we are born again as a child in the faith. This new birth marks a new spiritual beginning. In **1 Peter 2:2-3**, we are urged, **“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”**



In today's Scripture, we will see several examples of people growing in their faith and understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. Let's start by reading Acts 18:18-22.

II. Scripture Reading (Acts 18:18-22, NIV 1984)

18 Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken. 19 They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. 20 When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. 21 But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus. 22 When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.

III. Teaching

Paul returned to Antioch after about three years of travelling. This marks the end of his second missionary journey. The journey took Paul through a large part of Turkey and Greece, but close to half of the time was spent ministering in Corinth where Paul became close friends with Aquila and Priscilla, who were tentmakers by trade, like himself. When Paul left Corinth, this couple travelled with him as far as Ephesus where they stayed to continue the work.



The last part of **Acts 18:18** tells us, **“Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken.”** This photo shows the harbor at Cenchrea, so you can imagine Paul with this freshly shaved head boarding a ship here to sail for Ephesus. In Numbers 6, the shaving of the head marked the fulfillment of a Nazarite vow. At some point in his ministry in Corinth, Paul had apparently taken such a vow, perhaps to reaffirm his dedication to the Lord after the Lord spoke to him in the vision which we discussed last week. So for a time he would let his hair grow and would have refused to drink wine.



Paul was always vigorous in his argument that gentiles coming to faith in Jesus Christ should be free from the rules of Jewish ceremonial law and custom, but Paul himself was a Jew and on many occasions he followed the customs of his culture. In the Old Testament, those who wanted to be joined to the people of God had to adopt Jewish customs and culture, but in the New Testament, because of the finished work of Christ on the cross, we are free to come to God as we are in our own cultures, rejecting only those customs that directly conflict with following Jesus.

Acts 18:22 says, **“When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.”** Caesarea is on the coast in Israel, but if you go inland and climb up from there, you will arrive at Jerusalem, at an altitude of about 2,500 feet. Paul most likely wanted to go up to Jerusalem for

the Passover feast, and this is probably the reason he did not stay longer in Ephesus, but instead promised to return, saying, **(Acts 18:21), “I will come back if it is God’s will.”**

Paul’s promise demonstrates an important aspect of spiritual maturity. Seeking God’s heart and walking in His will is the natural result of spiritual maturity. A mature Christian knows the love and grace of God and trusts in the will of God for all things. The natural person is not spiritual and so seeks after their own will and is always in conflict with both God and the people around them. The mature Christian seeks to always walk according to God’s will and is in harmony with God. And, when we all mature in Christ, then we will also be in complete harmony with one another.



Jesus set the example for us when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. **Luke 22:42, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”** Let’s continue with Acts 18:23-28.



IV. Scripture Reading (Acts 18:23-28, NIV 1984)

23 After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. 24 Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. 26 He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. 27 When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. 28 For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

V. Teaching

At the beginning of this section, Paul returns to Antioch and spends some time there. We know that the church in Antioch has met in this cave (photo) since the 1st century and it is quite possible that Paul may have given his report of his missionary journeys and ministry in this very spot. In returning to his sending church and spending time there, Paul demonstrates another aspect of Christian maturity, accountability. The mature believer does not work alone, but seeks community and is willing to be accountable to other brothers and sisters.



If you meet a pastor or missionary who seems to be working alone, then it is appropriate to politely ask, “*Who are you accountable to?*” We should be very cautious if someone does not have someone that they are willing to submit to in an accountability relationship. Paul spent some time in Antioch and then departed on his third missionary journey going back to Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening the disciples in the places where he had ministered before.

Meanwhile, back in Ephesus, a man named Apollos, whose home was in Alexandria, Egypt, appeared and began to preach Jesus, but he was lacking in knowledge. **Acts 18:26, “He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.** Apollos was a learned man with a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures and he knew something about Jesus and accurately taught what he knew. But his knowledge was incomplete.

We will talk more about Priscilla and Aquila later, but on this occasion we see the two of them teaching Apollos. In listening to their instruction, Apollos demonstrates his humility and willingness to learn from others. In particular, it is noteworthy that Apollos was willing to learn from Priscilla, since Jewish culture



did not usually accept women as teachers. A teachable spirit is necessary for us if we desire to mature in Christ and Apollos is a good example for us.

Apollos knew only the baptism of John, but Christian baptism is much more than that; Christian baptism speaks of being united with Jesus in His death and resurrection. **Romans 6:3-4, “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”** I think Apollos must have rejoiced when he learned about this deeper meaning of Christian baptism and the other things he was taught.

After a time, Apollos desired to move to Corinth in Achaia. **Acts 18:27, “When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.”** Another aspect of Christian maturity is the willingness to encourage and help others, releasing them to their own ministry. Priscilla and Aquilla, and the rest of the believers in Ephesus did not try to keep Apollos with them, but instead sent him out with a letter of introduction.

In going to Corinth, Apollos was going to the very city where Paul had recently spent a year and a half. Apollos, in effect, became Paul’s successor in the ministry at Corinth and some of the people there even liked his preaching more than Paul’s. But mature Christians are not in competition with one another, but instead seek unity and joyfully encourage each other. Later on, in **1 Corinthians 3:6**, Paul wrote, **“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.”**

Let’s continue with Acts 19:1-10.

VI. Scripture Reading (Acts 19:1-10, NIV 1984)

1 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples 2 and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." 3 So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. 4 Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. 7 There were about twelve men in all.

8 Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. 9 But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. 10 This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

VII. Teaching

Earlier, Paul had promised to return to Ephesus if it was the will of God and it clearly was. Ephesus was a large and magnificent city of perhaps 250,000 people. Next week, I will share some more about Ephesus, but for today it is enough for us to remember that it was a major city of the Roman Empire, located on the west coast of what is now Turkey. Paul stayed in Ephesus and taught there, first in the synagogue and then in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, for over two years. With Paul’s teaching, the church at Ephesus became a missionary sending center as well, and the gospel was preached throughout the Roman province of Asia and beyond.



John the Baptist had a powerful ministry that prepared the way for Jesus’ coming and now we meet some more disciples who, like Apollos, had been baptized by John and who are believers in Jesus, but who

have serious gaps in their knowledge. Paul meets them shortly after he arrived in Ephesus and realizes that they do not know about the Holy Spirit. In **Acts 19:2**, Paul asks them, **“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’”**

In the church today there are still many Christians who do not know the Holy Spirit or who have only a vague idea about the fruit and gifts of the Spirit. If you feel that you might need to know more about the Spirit or about other basic topics of the Christian faith, then I would encourage you to join the Alpha Course. The fifteen session Alpha Course includes three talks about the Holy Spirit that will give you a good start on learning about the Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity of God. The Alpha Course is especially recommended for people who are just learning about Jesus or for new Christians, but it is also very helpful for filling in some of the gaps in our knowledge about the faith. And, taking the Alpha Course and then continuing on to become an Alpha small group leader will equip you to share the gospel more effectively with your family and friends, especially since it is easy to run the Alpha Course in a home.

VIII. Conclusion

Today, we have seen good examples of mature Christians and we have also seen how many Christians have gaps in their understanding of the faith. That is okay, we are all on the same journey of faith, but we are not at the same place on the path. I just want to encourage us all to continue onward to spiritual maturity in Christ. Some of us are at the beginning of our journey of faith. Some of us have been walking with the Lord for many years. But wherever you are on the journey: that is okay. The important thing is to keep moving forward toward a more intimate walk with Jesus and a more complete understanding of the Kingdom of God. There are many challenges along the way, but the Lord is with us and He will help us. Just keep going. Keep growing.



A few years after he left Ephesus, Paul wrote to the believers there to encourage them. In his letter he included some words about how God works in the church, words that capture the main point of today’s message very well. Let’s close with **Ephesians 4:11-13**, **“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”**

Let’s pray.

IX. Prayer