

11. PAUL'S THIRD MISSIONARY TRIP (53-58 A.D.)

Acts 18:23–21:16



Paul in prison
in Ephesus
Icon by Teresa Groselj, fsp

“After spending some time [in Jerusalem],” Paul set out on another missionary trip (cf. Acts 18:23).

He was accompanied by Timothy, Erastus and several other co-workers whom he does not name (cf. Acts 19:22). They traveled through Galatia and Phrygia, visiting the Christian communities already established there, and eventually reached Ephesus. There was a Christian community in this city too because, before Paul’s arrival, a Christian named Apollos had explained the Hebrew Scriptures to the people, demonstrating how they were fulfilled in Jesus. However, although Apollos was very familiar with the Old Testament and the preaching of John the Baptizer, he did not have a full grasp of Jesus and his message. Aquila and Priscilla, who had befriended Paul in Corinth, would later instruct Apollos more fully in the Faith and he too would become one of Paul’s co-workers.

As was his custom, Paul first of all proclaimed the Gospel in the synagogue. He did this for three months (19:8), and then, due to the hostility of some of the congregation, turned to the Gentiles (19:10). For the next two years, he held daily discussions with the pagans in the lecture room of Tyrannus, with whom he was staying. Thus both cultures, Jewish and Greek, received the word of the Lord from the

mouth of Paul (Acts 19:10).

The Apostle’s stay in Ephesus was one of the most difficult stages of his trip. While there, he unmasked a number of Jewish exorcists (Acts 19:11-20), who tried to imitate him by casting out evil spirits in his name. But the very spirits they sought to dominate mocked them. Amazed by this, the Ephesians brought their books on magic to the town square and burned them publicly.

During Paul’s stay in Ephesus, he sent Timothy and Erastus ahead of him to Macedonia. While they were gone he became involved in a confrontation with the silversmiths of Ephesus, who made and sold small shrines of Artemis, the goddess of fertility. The Apostle’s preaching caused many of the Ephesians to abandon this cult, thus decreasing sales of the statuettes. The silversmiths, worried that their livelihood was threatened, incited the crowds to rise up in protest against Paul (Acts 19:23-40). The mob dragged two of the Apostle’s co-workers, Gaius and Aristarchus, to the theater, which could hold about 25,000 people. Paul refers to this event in his letter to the Corinthians, where he says: “If I fought wild animals at Ephesus in a purely human perspective, what had I to gain by it?” (1 Co. 15:32) His comment in 2 Co. 1:8-10 leads us to surmise that he barely escaped death. Perhaps this was the occasion on which Aquila and Priscilla risked their lives to save him (Rm. 16:3-4).

It was during his two years in Ephesus that Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians and Galatians. He also intended to visit Jerusalem and then go to Rome.

After he left Ephesus, the Apostle went to Macedonia and from there, accompanied by a number of friends, he reached Corinth, where he spent the winter. Here he wrote his magnificent Letter to the Romans, in which he reveals his desire to reach the ends of the earth, which at that time meant the Iberian peninsula. On his way to Jerusalem to deliver the alms he had collected for the poverty-stricken Christians there, he stopped in Troas, where he restored a young boy, Eutychus, to life (cf. Acts 20:7-12). After Troas, he went to Miletus and from there sent for the elders of the Church of Ephesus. When they arrived, he delivered a discourse that has come to be called his “*spiritual testament*” (Acts 20:17-35). In this speech, he summarizes his life and then reminds these church leaders to carry out their service attentively, selflessly and responsibly, reminding them that they should be like watchmen on the ramparts of a city, protecting it from harm. He concludes by citing words of Jesus not recorded in the Gospels: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Paul's words reveal him as an evangelizer-shepherd who is concerned about the future of the Christian community, foreseeing that problems will arise. He told the elders of Ephesus that he was convinced that imprisonment and perhaps even death awaited him in Jerusalem. Hearing his, they begged him not to go there but he replied that he was ready to do the will of God to the very end, no matter what the cost. Luke infers that Paul's presentiment of what will happen to him was similar to the foreknowledge Jesus experienced about his own end when he turned his steps toward Jerusalem (cf. Lk. 9:51).

Deeply moved by Paul's words, the elders of Ephesus accompanied the Apostle to his ship. Disembarking at Tyre, he then proceeded to Caesarea Maritima, where he called on the deacon Philip. While there, a prophet called Agabus prophesied Paul's dramatic end. Once again urged by his friends to avoid Jerusalem, Paul declared that he was ready to die for Christ, concluding with the words: "The Lord's will be done" (Acts. 21:14). He was determined to reach Jerusalem in time for Pentecost.

In recounting the last stage of Paul's life, Luke sketches out the portrait of a disciple whose life perfectly reproduced Jesus, his Master. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul went to see James and the other heads of the Church who were present. They advised him to go to the Temple with a group of men who were under a vow and to be purified with them so that the Jews could see that he (Paul) had nothing against the Temple. Paul complied with this request but a misunderstanding arose that led to his arrest. Several Jews had seen him in the company of a Gentile and mistakenly believed that he had brought the man into the Temple area reserved only for Jews. Enraged, they dragged Paul out of the Temple and tried to kill him. He was saved by the intervention of the Roman tribune and his soldiers, who mistook the Apostle for an Egyptian who had led a recent revolt (cf. Acts 21:27-36).

Paul was arrested but was spared the death sentence because of his Roman citizenship (cf. Acts 22:3ff.). The Apostle remained in prison until Antonius Felix, the governor of Judea, who lived in Caesarea, could be notified and hear his case.

FOR DEEPER REFLECTION



Lechaeon Port, Corinth

tensions and sufferings that tore apart the community, a number of Corinthian Christians—in particular Phoebe, Stephanus and Crispus—were among the Apostle's most dedicated co-workers.

Corinth, a Greek port city, was one of the chief commercial centers of the ancient world. Its citizens were considered superficial and loose-living and thus the city did not have a good reputation. It was filled with philosophers and polished speakers who proposed new religious doctrines and as a consequence the Corinthians worshiped a wide array of gods. Society was divided into two classes: the wealthy and the poor. Paul visited the Christians of Corinth at least three times and wrote a number of letters to them, only two of which have come down to us. In these letters, he defended himself from his adversaries by vigorously asserting that he was a genuine apostle. In spite of the many



Ephesus

Ephesus, another port city and the capital of the Roman province of Asia, was much more beautiful and refined than Corinth. It was home to a very popular cult of Artemis, the goddess of fertility, which dated back to the 8th century B.C. Its temple to the goddess was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and every Spring worshippers flocked to the city to celebrate her feast. At the time of Paul, Ephesus was the religious, economic and administrative headquarters of Asia.