

Acts 18:18-23: “Ends” In Mind VI: Paul & Co-travelers Circling Around

“Between spaces”. Someone has said that the only constant in life is change. If you think about the story of your life, you can think of graduating from one school to the next, maybe moving from one place to the next, changing and sometimes losing and finding jobs, going from single to married to having young children at home to children in school, to an empty nest to grandchildren. Sometimes the changes are changes of loss: losing a job, retiring, physical changes, loss of someone close to us, first parents, then friends, perhaps a spouse.

Change is often a season rather than a moment, a space between life as we knew it in some way, and a life yet to be discovered. Sometimes as in a graduation, a marriage, or starting a family, or a new job, there can be great joy or excitement. Changes involving loss often bring great sadness. One thing common to all changes is that they can be times of growth and development or times that harden or embitter or scar us. How we navigate the “between spaces” of our lives can make a great difference in the richness or emptiness of our lives.

Travelogue: Acts 18:18-23 reads like a travelogue. At first when I read this, I wondered, “what can I preach about that?” Luke condenses at least a year and a half, and thousands of miles of travel by boat or on foot into six verses. These verses come between extended times of ministry in Corinth on the front end, and a couple years at Ephesus on the other side. But what I want to observe is that while we read Acts as a complete story with these verses serving as connecting material between two significant seasons of ministry at Corinth and Ephesus, for Paul, these verses represented a “between space” of over a year and half, and that for Paul, any work in Ephesus was “if it is God’s will.”

Paul’s handling of “Between Spaces”: I think as we trace Paul’s travels, we can learn some things about how we can navigate the “between spaces” in our lives.

- **Corinth: Finishing.** If you recall, Paul had enjoyed a year and a half of fruitful ministry until the Jews united to attack him, an attack to which Gallio the proconsul put an end. It was probably the signal to Paul that it was time to wrap up his work there and turn things over to the Corinthians. Instead of leaving, he stayed on for some time but we don’t hear a lot about what he was doing. Likely, he was preparing others to lead in his

place. Good leadership isn't done until leaders replace themselves. Paul finishes the job.

- **Cenchreae: Thanksgiving.** He leaves Corinth with his friends Priscilla and Aquila to go to Syria, which is where the church at Antioch was located, the church that had sent Paul on mission. Cenchreae was the port city for Corinth. It is here that Paul cuts his hair because of a vow. We read that and wonder what is that about? When Jews wanted to seek God's will, or to put trust in God in a particular situation, they often took a vow, sometimes called a Nazirite vow that involved abstaining from alcoholic drink and from cutting one's hair for a certain period. When the period was complete, they would cut their hair, and then offer it to God along with a sacrifice in Jerusalem. Luke doesn't give us any explanation, but the most likely one is that Paul took a vow to be safely delivered from his enemies, and the cutting of hair was an act of thanksgiving that God had done what was sought. Since it could only be offered in Jerusalem, that might explain Paul's urgency to get there. Stopping to remember God's protection in Corinth as he set sail was a great way to bring this episode of his work to a close.
- **Ephesus: Exploration.** First, though, they stop in Ephesus. It may be that this was as far as Aquila and Priscilla wanted to go. It was a leading center of commerce and a great place for them to ply their trade of making tents. Paul takes time to explore the potential for ministry here. He discovers the Jews here very open, but Paul does something puzzling. He declines but promises to come back. Some versions of the text add that Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem for the festival, meaning Passover. There was a narrow sailing window after the winter storms that would allow him to get there in time and this may explain his action. Or he may simply be really tired after his journey and the attacks at Corinth and needs some time before another intense time of ministry. He explores, leaves Aquila and Priscilla behind to lay foundations, goes on. The space between can be a time to explore new possibilities without making commitments too soon.
- **Jerusalem: Renewing ties.** Instead of going *down* to Antioch from Caesarea, he goes *up*. NIV supplies the word "Jerusalem" which for the Jews was the one place to which you went up. Part of this was to complete his vow by offering his hair and sacrifices. The rest was to renew connections with

Jewish believers. He recognized that relationships take feeding, especially ones that could be strained in tensions between Jewish and Gentile parts of the church. Strengthening relationships is one of the best ways to use the “space between.”

- **Antioch: Accountability and rest.** Antioch in Syria, if you remember, was the first Jewish and Gentile community to be called Christian, the place where Paul and Barnabas had ministered, and the place that sent them out on what we call “missionary journeys.” No doubt part of his time was giving an account of what the Lord had done on his latest set of journeys. But he may well have spent the best part of a year here. No doubt part of it was time to just rest. Often, we arrive at “between spaces” in need of rest, and rest prepares us to better hear what God has for us next.
- **Galatia/Phrygia: Sustaining.** It was probably the following spring when Paul begins what would be a 1500-mile journey through Asia Minor that would eventually take him by land back to Ephesus. Only then would the roads be good for travel. The first part of his path takes him through the towns where he had previously begun churches in Phrygia and Galatia. Paul sustains and strengthens the disciples he helped bring to the Lord even as he moves toward the new work God has. He does not forget past relationships as he presses toward new ones

Our own Between Spaces

- **Closure with rather than clinging to the past.** Sometimes when something is coming to an end, it is tempting to cling to the good thing we know rather than move toward the new thing God has. We should finish with a flourish and thanksgiving for this season. Do you know high school classmates who talk about this as the best time of their lives? Or the perpetual college student. There is a time to graduate, to finish, to celebrate, or grieve when there is loss, and step into the place between.
- **Faithful waiting rather than frantic grasping.** The place between is uncomfortable because most of us like to know what’s ahead, where we are going. So much of life emphasizes doing. Sometimes, we need time just to explore, to re-connect, to listen to the significant people in our lives, and to rest. That’s what faithful waiting looks like.

- **Trusting God with our story.** Spaces between may feel like a story that is over without an end, particularly a happy ending. To trust God in our space between times is to believe that he is writing a story in our lives that will end well, part of his bigger story for the world which ends well. Perhaps the biggest thing to navigating the spaces between is the decision we make of whether to trust God with our stories or to cling to the past or grasp at straws for the future. Luke's travelogue of Paul's "circling around" shows us what it is like to live faithful in the space between.