

TRANSITIONS ACTS 18:18-19:7

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Life is full of transitions. Some of them are pleasant: graduations, weddings, births, new jobs. Others are not so pleasant: deaths, divorces, job losses, major health challenges, giving up our driver's licenses, needing regular care in our old age.

Some transitions are the result of our own choices. Some transitions are forced upon us. The people of God in the midst of transitions often try to learn lessons and make conclusions about God's direction in their lives. There are, however, special dangers which come with making major decisions in times of transition. In the face of stress we are prone often to make hasty conclusions and put undue weight upon our immediate circumstances and our feelings about them.

Jeff Guthrie had a lot of unhappy transitions in his young life. This South Carolina native never finished high school. His parents got divorced. He finished his GED in 1988 and went off to Europe looking for this German foreign exchange student whom he had met in high school. That did not work out. He bummed around Europe for several years. He got involved in some experiences that were not so good. He eventually flew back to the States, splitting time with his two divorced parents. He tried college, but had little success.

Finally in 1999 Jeff Guthrie showed up at a Marine Corps recruiting office, hoping that he might get his life together in the Corps. He did boot camp at Parris Island. He was assigned to an infantry unit. In 2003 he found himself in Baghdad in the most intense conflict in his life. But out of that difficult experience he experienced the most positive transition in his life.

The Book of Acts, which we have been studying, is a book of transitions. It is the story about a transition that God was making in His program of dealing with mankind. It is the story of the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament, from life in anticipation of the Messiah to life in contemplation of the Messiah having come.

So we need to be very careful about how we interpret this part of the Bible. Much of it is describing transitions. If we did not remember the transitional nature of the Book of Acts we might look at the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts #2 and conclude that churches should fast and pray and meet in an upper room and expect God to send the Holy Spirit in the same way that He did on the Day of Pentecost.

Someone not taking into account the transitional nature of the Book of Acts might also conclude erroneously that when missionaries go out to the mission field, they should

always go first to a Jewish synagogue and preach there. That's the pattern that Paul and Barnabas and Silas followed.

The passage before us today has a special emphasis on transitions. As we consider the transitions being described, I hope that we will learn some lessons which we can apply when we find ourselves passing through transitions in life.

We have been looking recently at the incidents described in the Apostle Paul's second missionary journey. (PROJECTOR ON--- SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) We have seen that he had gone out with Silas from his home church in Antioch in Syria. The two of them revisited some of the churches that Paul had established earlier in Asia Minor. Then we saw how God had called them through a vision to go over to Greece. They had a mixed reception in the towns of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth. They were forced out of most of the towns. (THESSALONICA CORINTH) We saw last time that Paul spent about eighteen months in Corinth. Many people responded there to the gospel.

I.

So we pick up the story at that point. (I. PAUL AND US AND PHYSICAL TRANSITIONS) We are going to consider the subject of PAUL AND US AND PHYSICAL TRANSITIONS as we look at vv. 18-23 of Acts #18. Verse 18 indicates that after a year and a half in Corinth Paul headed down to the seaport of Cenchrea (CENCHREA) and took a ship headed toward Syria. The year was probably 52 AD. Reference is made to the fact that Priscilla and Aquila were with him. We saw last time that Paul had become friends with this Jewish couple in Corinth.

Mention is made of the fact that Paul was keeping a vow. We don't know what was involved in this. The fact that he cut his hair may suggest that he had taken a Nazirite vow. This was a vow described in Numbers #6 that a man could take who wanted to make a special act of devotion to the Lord. There was not a required length of time involved. During the time of the vow the individual could not eat any grape product, and he could not cut his hair. At the end of the vow he had to cut his hair, and he had to offer a sacrifice in the temple. This stipulation could explain why Paul was intent upon getting to Jerusalem.

The ship carrying the missionaries stopped at Ephesus (CORINTH EPHESUS MAP), which was the capital of the Roman province of Asia, and the most important city in this entire region. Priscilla and Aquilla remained there. Paul stayed for only a brief time. Yet he had a very positive response when he preached about Jesus in the synagogue. He refused to stay, saying that he would return to them if God willed it.

The ship continued on to Caesarea (EPHESUS CAESAREA), which was the major seaport of all of Judea. From there Paul went up and greeted "the church." No doubt the church in Jerusalem is in view. From there Paul traveled to Antioch to the north in Syria, which was where his sending church was located. His visits to Jerusalem and Antioch may have involved a considerable length of time, but the historian Luke passes over

them quickly and moves on to Paul's third missionary journey. (THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY) Brief mention is then made in v. 23 that Paul revisits the churches in Asia Minor which he had founded on his first visit with Barnabas.

Paul spent much of his life making physical transitions. (PROJECTOR OFF) He moved a lot. He was an itinerant preacher. He didn't spend a lot of time in any one place. In some places he didn't stay as long as he wanted to because he got run out of town. During the course of his ministry he was beaten and stoned and thrown into of jail and simply kicked out of town. His was a life of physical transition.

If Paul had responded to his physical circumstances as we Christians are sometimes inclined to respond, he might have said, "OK, Lord, I get the message. You want me to stop this evangelism business. For if you had really wanted me to be a missionary, things would go a lot smoother than this." Or if Paul didn't quite come to that conclusion, he could have looked at his circumstances and concluded that he shouldn't have gone into Europe: "OK, Lord, I must have been imagining things. I thought you were telling me in that vision that you wanted me to go into Europe. But if you wanted me in Europe, I certainly would have had a more friendly reception than I have been getting."

If Paul didn't respond that way to his physical circumstances and difficult transitions, perhaps he might have adopted the thinking that Christians at times erroneously adopt. He might have looked at his circumstances and said, "There must be some sin in my life. God must be punishing me. I know he wants me preaching here in Europe. But I must have something wrong about my motives or my behavior because of the difficult time that I am having. God is punishing me."

God was not punishing Paul, and Paul was supposed to be preaching in Europe. A few weeks ago we saw that when one persists in doing God's will, he is bound to encounter opposition. Bad things can be the result of sinful behavior and/or discipline from God. But hard things and bad things can also happen to godly people seeking to do God's will for reasons we sometimes understand and for reasons we sometimes don't understand.

Paul was clearly engaged in following God's will. The Lord had appeared to him on several occasions in a miraculous way and had given Paul definite directions for the course of his ministry. So in the midst of transitions and difficult circumstances Paul made decisions based upon his life goals and upon the Word of God. At times he did have to take physical circumstances into account. Sometimes he was forced out of a town. But that did not deter him from his basic direction in life.

Many of the transitions in life that we encounter are not wanted. Many of us have lost mates or kids or parents. Many of us have been fired. Some of us have lost a certain measure of independence and have had to move into assisted living facilities. Most of us have encountered rejection of some kind. But in the midst of those difficult circumstances we need to make clear and wise decisions that are based upon the reality of our situation and upon our life goals and upon the commands and principles of

the Word of God. Too often we Christians give up too soon or read things into our circumstances that God never intended for us to get from them. Sometimes the Lord does use hard circumstances to get our attention.

II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- APOLLOS AND US AND...) In vv. 24-28, then, we come to APOLLOS AND US AND INTELLECTUAL TRANSITIONS. According to v. 24 Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, which is located in Egypt. Alexandria (ALEXANDRIA), like Athens, was a center of education and study. Its library, which had over 500,000 books, was the largest in the world. Our text says that Apollos was “eloquent,” or perhaps “learned.” He had received a good education in Alexandria, which had a large Jewish population. Apollos was also an effective communicator.

This Egyptian Jew knew something about Jesus, and had faith in him. (PROJECTOR OFF) Verse 25 says that he was acquainted with the baptism of John. Probably the influence of John the Baptist had reached all the way to the Jewish community in Alexandria. Perhaps Apollos had even traveled to Israel to listen to, and be baptized by, John. But Apollos had not heard the whole story about Jesus. It seems that he was not familiar with the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the implications of these matters for the true followers of God. What Apollos knew about Jesus was accurate, but it was incomplete. He had knowledge of the Bible and great communication ability and fervency and faith in Jesus as Israel's messiah. But his knowledge of Jesus was limited. My guess is that he did not have the Holy Spirit yet residing in him.

One Sabbath after Paul had left Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila were in attendance at the synagogue where they heard Apollos speak. In v. 26 we are introduced to one of the most important principles in all of the Christian faith, though its significance is often overlooked. That principle is that after the service you take the preacher home for dinner.

In this case Priscilla and Aquilla took Apollos home not just to feed him but also to fill in the gaps in his knowledge. Their way of doing this is also noteworthy. Some Christians today might have interrupted Apollos in the midst of his talk and corrected his doctrine. Or they might have written letters to the editor. Or they might have complained to the president of the synagogue or the elders. But instead of embarrassing him in a public situation or working behind his back they talked to him privately. Maybe they brought him home for dinner. The text doesn't actually say.

Verses 27 and 28 indicate that Apollos was responsive to their instruction. The details of what happened are omitted by Luke. But sometime afterward Apollos left for Achaia in Greece to do ministry there. The Christians from the church sent him off with a letter of commendation. Paul's letters to the church in Corinth in Achaia indicate that Apollos spent time there and was a real blessing to the church.

So what happened to Apollos at Ephesus was an intellectual transition of sorts. Apollos was knowledgeable, and he taught the truth. But he didn't know the whole truth. Priscilla and Aquilla may not have had the academic credentials that Apollos did, but they knew the whole truth about Jesus. They shared that information with Apollos.

In the midst of this intellectual transition Apollos could have responded to this information in a less positive way. If he had responded on the basis of emotions, he might have considered what could have been a less prestigious intellectual background for Priscilla and Aquilla. He could have had an angry action. He could have had the attitude: Who do you think you are telling a scholar like me that you have knowledge that I don't?

Or he could have responded on the basis of the results he had seen. He could have had the attitude: Why should I change my preaching? Look at the positive feedback that I get from this congregation. They love to hear me teach and preach. Why should I change my message?

But because Apollos had the Bible as his standard for evaluating new information and because he was unaware of what had happened to Jesus, he believed and accepted what Priscilla and Aquilla told him about the Savior. Intellectual pride is often a barrier that keeps people from responding positively to the message about Christ. To accept the information about Jesus as true involves an act of humility. It necessitates the removal of human reason and self from the center of one's life. It requires the submission of our wills to someone beyond ourselves. For people with intellectual pride that kind of transition is difficult.

We see this in the world of education and science. Many scientists try to explain the world around us without any reference to a Creator. Michel-Yves Bollere is a French computer engineer with advanced degrees in math and computer science. He writes, **"It's getting harder for scientists not to believe in God... with sets of converging evidence from different scientific disciplines--- cosmology to physics, biology to chemistry--- it is increasingly difficult for materialists to hold their position. Indeed, if they deny a creator, then they must accept and uphold that the universe had no beginning, that some of the greatest laws of physics (the principle of conservation of mass-energy, for example) have been violated, and that the laws of nature have no particular reason to favour the emergence of life."** (Breakpoint, 11/3/2025)

In the ivory towers of American education and in far too many American classrooms the political theory of socialism holds sway. Political scientists are just too proud, and some would say--- too dumb, to recognize that wherever socialism and communism have been tried around the world, the results have been disastrous. Yet the people of New York City this week elected a self-proclaimed socialist to be mayor of their city.

In the information age in which we live, all of us have gaps in our knowledge. There is just too much information in the world around us for one person to grasp. If we are

going to continue to learn, there will always be gaps in our knowledge, and we are always going to be making intellectual transitions. In the midst of physical transitions and in the midst of intellectual transitions, we need to turn to the Scriptures as the ultimate source of wisdom.

III.

(PROJECTOR ON--- THE TWELVE AND US AND...) Consider then vv. 1-7 of Acts #19 and the subject of THE TWELVE AND US AND SPIRITUAL TRANSITIONS. The third missionary journey of Paul probably occurred between 53 and 56 AD. Most of that time was spent here at Ephesus. (EPHESUS MAP) Verse 1 says, **“And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples.”** Verse 7 tells us that there were twelve of these disciples.

We aren’t told specifically of whom they were disciples. It is possible that they were disciples of John the Baptist. The context seems to suggest that they identified themselves as followers of Jesus. Thus in v. 2 Paul asks if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed. We are also left in the dark about the source of their knowledge about Jesus. Did they, like Apollos, hear about Jesus from John the Baptist or from some of his disciples? Did they hear about Him from Apollos?

Whatever their source of knowledge about Jesus there seemed to Paul to be something missing from their lives. He asked them if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed. This is where it is important to understand the transitional nature of the Book of Acts. (1 CORINTHIANS 12:13) In 1 Corinthians #12 v. 13 Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth, saying, **“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”** The implication is that whenever an individual trusts in Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to live within him and unites him with other believers in the body of Christ.

(ROMANS 8:9) In Romans #8 v. 9 Paul would also write, **“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”** Paul is saying, in effect, if a person doesn’t have the Holy Spirit dwelling within him, he isn’t a Christian.

So what is going on in Acts #19? (PROJECTOR OFF) When Paul asks the twelve if they have received the Holy Spirit, they respond, **“No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”** That is probably not the best translation. A better rendering would go like this: **“We have not even heard whether the Holy Spirit has been given.”** The Old Testament spoke about the Spirit of God. John the Baptist had also spoken to his followers about the Holy Spirit and about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. If the twelve knew something about Jesus or John, they must have known something about the Holy Spirit. But they might not have heard that the Holy Spirit had been given in the way that He was given after Pentecost.

In v. 3 Paul asks them, **“Into what then were you baptized?”** They respond, **“Into John’s baptism.”** So it seems to be a reasonable deduction that these guys were Old Testament saints like Apollos. They had a genuine faith in God. They responded positively when they were exposed to the preaching of John the Baptist. They were baptized as a sign of repentance for their sins and of faith in the coming of the Messiah. When Jesus came along, they believed that He was that Messiah. Because they were living a long ways from the land of Israel, they never heard the whole story about what happened to Jesus and about what the significance of those events was.

So we have a unique situation here that has to do with the transitional aspect of the Book of Acts. We have Old Testament believers who came to a saving faith in God before the death and resurrection of Jesus. They were headed for heaven, but they didn’t know the full story about Jesus. Because they had come to a saving faith in God before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they apparently had not experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and they did not have the Holy Spirit resident within them.

Verse 4 contains just a brief sketch of the information that Paul gave to these twelve men about Jesus. No doubt the apostle gave them a lot more information. But when they were told what they needed to know, they responded positively and were baptized in water in the name of Jesus. John’s baptism had symbolized faith in the coming of the Messiah and what He would accomplish. The baptism that these twelve now experienced was a sign of faith in a Messiah who had already come and had died on the cross to pay the penalty for their sins.

The writer Luke says in v. 6, **“And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.”** This was the same kind of spiritual experience that the disciples of Jesus had on the Day of Pentecost. This spiritual experience must have been a great encouragement to these twelve men. It showed them the spiritual power that they had been missing. It gave them dramatic evidence of the truth and the power of the gospel.

To Christians who may have been present with Paul it would have been evidence that these men were truly fellow believers. It also would have been an affirmation to them of Paul’s claim to be an apostle of Christ. He was the one who laid hands on the twelve, and it was in response to this action that the Holy Spirit came upon them.

This miracle also would have had an impact upon unbelievers. Ephesus was a cosmopolitan city. There were people living there from many parts of the world. As happened on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem these unbelievers must have heard these Christians praising God and speaking about Jesus in their native languages. Thus this spiritual experience would have been a witness to them and perhaps a sign of judgment as well.

The mistake that some Christians have made is to look at this passage and treat it as being normative or descriptive of how the Christian life should be today. Somebody could look at this passage and conclude that the Holy Spirit comes upon believers only

when an apostle lays his hands upon them. I doubt that there are Biblical apostles around today. Beyond that you could look at the experience of Pentecost in Acts 2 and the incident with Cornelius in Acts 10 and find that the Holy Spirit came upon believers in those cases without their being any laying on of hands. Here and in the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans apostles did lay on hands, resulting in this Pentecostal experience.

At Pentecost in Acts 2 the Holy Spirit came after the disciples of Jesus prayed fervently for the Holy Spirit to come. In Acts #10 the Holy Spirit came upon a group of Gentiles while Peter was still preaching. There wasn't even any opportunity to pray. They did not even know that there was a Holy Spirit. In Acts 10 the Gentiles experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit before they were baptized with water. Here in Acts 19 the twelve men experience the coming of the Holy Spirit after they are baptized with water.

So how does a person draw principles out of these seemingly different experiences? In one sense I don't think that we should. We have to keep in mind the transitional nature of the Book of Acts. God was shifting His program from an Old Testament way of doing things to a New Testament way of doing things. To figure out the principles that we need to know about the coming of the Holy Spirit we have to turn to the teaching part of the New Testament, to the epistles.

As I pointed out earlier, 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 8 indicate that the Holy Spirit comes to reside within a believer today when he or she places his or her faith in Christ. A few years after the events described here the Apostle Paul would make mention of the Holy Spirit in a letter to the Christians of this same city. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 1:13) In the first chapter of Ephesians he writes, **"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, (EPHESIANS 1:14) who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."**

So what was the Lord doing with the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts? He was bringing various groups into the one body of Christ. On the Day of Pentecost He was bringing Jews who believed in Jesus into the body of Christ. In Samaria He was bringing those who were half-Jews and half-Gentiles into the Body of Christ. With Cornelius and the other Gentiles in Acts 10 the Lord was showing that Gentiles could be part of this same body of Christ simply by believing upon Jesus. Now in Acts 19 He was showing that Old Testament saints could be part of the body of Christ through faith in Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Lord was also publicly affirming the authority of the apostles in each of these four experiences involving the coming of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10 with Cornelius and in Acts 8 with the Samaritans Peter played a leading role. Now Paul was an instrument used in the coming of the Holy Spirit. This experience confirmed their position and authority and again it tended to promote the unity of the universal church.

So because of the transitional nature of the Book of Acts we have to be careful about the principles that we draw from it. That doesn't mean that Acts has little or no value. It has great value. It tells us about the history of the early church. It contains portions where the apostles do teach doctrine. Also the book illustrates doctrine and truths that are taught elsewhere in the Bible.

The story of these twelve disciples in this last part of our passage reminds us about the importance of spiritual transitions. Lance Corporal Jeff Guthrie had experienced difficult transitions in his young life. In April of 2003 he found himself serving in the First Battalion Fifth Marine Regiment in Iraq. His unit's mission was to penetrate Baghdad and reach the center of the city. He was part of an armored unit which included Abrams tanks. But it also had more lightly armored vehicles like personnel carriers and Humvees.

So the run that this unit made into Baghdad was intense. It was an urban area and enemy fire came from every direction. There were rocket propelled grenades and small arms fire. The noise was deafening. They made it into Baghdad with amazingly few casualties. Many of the troops recognized God's protection.

Afterward Chaplain Carey Cash described the conversation that he had with Jeff Guthrie. As many of you veterans know, the Marines do not have their own chaplains. Carey Cash was a Navy chaplain assigned to this unit. Carey Cash also happens to be the great nephew of Johnny Cash. Today Carey Cash is a Rear Admiral.

So this is what Carey Cash wrote about his interaction with Lance Corporal Jeff Guthrie: **"Sitting down on the grass in front of him, I asked what was wrong. 'Sir... I'm just so sorry,' he said, tears welling up in his tired eyes. 'Sorry for what, Guthrie?' I had no idea what he was talking about. 'It's just what I've done in my life. All I can think about is that I've just been through the worst experience of my life, and yet, God protected me through it all. But why did He do it? How could He do it after all the things--- the bad things--- I've done? I don't know what else to say, what else to feel. I'm just so sorry.'**

"By now the tears were streaming down his face. (PROJECTOR ON--- MARINES IN BAGHDAD) Guthrie's fellow Marines, all twenty of them who were seated around the same ramp, stopped everything. They were listening intently, watching everything. He and I could both feel their gaze. But it didn't matter. He was overcome..."

"I was looking into the face of a man, who, for the first time in his life, was truly encountering the power of God. 'Jeff,' I said gently. 'Do you realize that God sent His Son Jesus for no other purpose than for forgiving all those things you or I have ever done wrong in life?' He nodded. 'Jeff, do you believe that God loves you and that He sent His Son Jesus to die for you?' 'Yes, I do,' he said, his voice broken and trembling. 'And do you want to experience the joy and peace of knowing that all your sins are completely and forever forgiven?' 'I do,' he

answered. 'Then why don't you bow in prayer with me right here right now? Ask God to do just that--- to send His Son Jesus into your heart and life and cleanse you from all your sin and give to you the promise of heaven.' We bowed together as twenty watching Marines stared in disbelief."

"Our prayer together was brief, but it was rich with life and meaning. For there on the lawn of Saddam Hussein's Presidential Palace, Lance Corporal Jeff Guthrie, a man who had wandered the path of the prodigal son for years, who had avoided God because of his fear of what others might think, who had spent all he had searching for happiness, meaning, and fulfillment, bowed his head." The next day was Palm Sunday. On that day Cash baptized Guthrie in the palace of Saddam Hussein. (Carey Cash, *A Table in the Presence*) By the end of his tour Lieutenant Cash had baptized 59 Marines.

Perhaps there is someone here who can identify with Jeff Guthrie. You have had a lot of difficult transitions in life. You have been searching for meaning and purpose in life. You recognize the decision that he made is what you need to do.

Perhaps you can relate to the twelve disciples in our passage. You have a certain belief in God and even in Jesus. But you have never really personalized this faith by welcoming Jesus into your life. If any of this should be true of you, I would welcome you to join me in this prayer. If it expresses your desire to be connected with God through faith in Jesus, just pray along silently with me.

Lord Jesus, I believe that you are God who became a human being. I believe that you died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins. I believe that you rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Come into my life. I put my trust in You. Amen.