

10. The incidents at the judgment seat didn't yield the Jews' desired outcome. They intended to intimidate, humiliate and finally silence their Jewish brethren who had embraced this false messiah. In that way they'd also demonstrate to Corinth's synagogue community what awaits those who choose to become involved with this pernicious "way." The Jews had hoped to secure the civil authority as their ally, but to no avail. They likely had some success in intimidating their fellow Jews, but they didn't gain Gallio's support and the text gives no indication that either Paul or Sosthenes were swayed by the assaults upon them. Unlike previous times when Paul was compelled to flee under persecution, Luke's account seems to indicate that he continued on at Corinth for some time after these events: "*And Paul, having yet remained a good many days...*" (18:18a).

It's doubtful that the Jews' indignation and deadly designs were any less at Corinth than at Thessalonica or Berea and Gallio's indifference didn't mitigate the threats against Paul and his fellows; quite the opposite, it emboldened the Jews in their cause (18:14-17). Luke's account points to a different reason for Paul's decision to continue on at Corinth: Jesus Himself had directed him to be steadfast in his work in that city. Paul was to minister with boldness, unmoved by threats and assaults, for the Lord had determined to raise up a believing community in Corinth and had made provision for Paul's success.

- a. Inevitably, though, Paul's season in Corinth came to an end. Luke doesn't say how Paul discerned that it was time to depart, noting only that he left with the goal of returning to Antioch in Syria. Luke's record also provides no direct explanation for Paul's decision to take Aquila and Priscilla with him; did they plead with him to go or did he recruit them? Whatever the discussion that led to the decision, Luke wanted his readers to understand that it was *providential*: Christ's purpose and work directed this outcome, not the wishes and reasoning of these three individuals. They couldn't know it at the time, but the Spirit had work for Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus, work that would serve the preparation of another mighty instrument of the gospel – a man named Apollos. In completely unpredictable and marvelous fashion, divine design was orchestrating an encounter between distant individuals: a couple exiled from Rome and a man who hailed from Alexandria in Egypt. The Spirit had brought Paul to Aquila and Priscilla for the sake of Christ's gospel and the faith of His saints, and He was now poised to further that work by giving this couple to Apollos.
- b. The three companions departed Corinth toward the east and the port of Cenchrea on the Saronic Gulf. There they hoped to locate and board a ship sailing across the Aegean Sea toward Asia. Luke's only account of the time spent at Cenchrea concerns a decision – apparently by Paul – to cut his hair in connection with a vow (18:18b). Luke clearly had a reason for including this episode in his record, but that reason – and the background and import of the episode itself – is left for the reader to surmise. Toward that end, some considerations are helpful:
- 1) First of all, it must be determined whether Paul or Aquila took the vow. Luke's participle (*having cut his hair*) has Aquila as its closest syntactical referent and thus some scholars believe he's the one Luke was referring to.

This is certainly possible, but a couple of things point toward Paul. The first is the fact that Paul is clearly the focal point of this context (as indeed the entire second half of the book of Acts), making it somewhat strange that Luke would mention a vow taken by Aquila, especially as a passing comment without further explanation. What possible contribution does such a statement make to his larger narrative and its purpose?

The second issue pertains to the structure of Luke's sentence. First, the other two participles in the sentence – which are also masculine singular – (*having remained yet a good many days* and *having taken leave of the brethren*) unarguably refer to Paul, which at least suggests that the third does as well. Secondly, the modifying clause, “*and Priscilla and Aquila were with him,*” functions as a parenthesis within the larger statement.

Clearly none of these considerations is decisive in and of itself. However, taken together they do provide substantial support for the conclusion that Paul was the one who had taken the vow.

- 2) A second observation concerns the fact that this vow and its execution somehow implicated Paul's hair. This suggests that the vow was possibly the Nazirite vow of dedication to the Lord (Numbers 6:1ff). This vow was a voluntary oath of personal consecration, and while bound by it the Nazirite had to abstain from the fruit of the vine, not trim his hair or beard and remain ceremonially clean. (The Pentateuch made this vow available to women, but there are no instances in the Scripture of female Nazirites.)

Any number of personal considerations could lead a person to take the Nazirite vow, and having done so, this oath would bind him for a predetermined period of time. (The Mishnah prescribes a normal interval of 30 days, although a man could double or even triple that.) When the time of dedication was completed, the Nazirite was released from his separated status and restored to ordinary life.

The Nazirite vow was personal and voluntary, but the Scripture records a few instances in which *God* imposed it upon men and bound them to it for life. Samson was the first of such men (Judges 13:1-7), but John the Baptist apparently shared the same status (ref. Luke 1:11-17). Samuel should probably also be included in this group of men; though his mother Hannah committed him to the Lord as a Nazirite, the larger context implies that her pledge reflected His sovereign design and determination (ref. 1 Samuel 1:1-11.) God's appointment of these men as lifelong Nazirites is explained by their unique status and role. Each was specially chosen and set apart by Yahweh to fulfill specific, critical roles in the history of His relationship with Israel – that is, the salvation history as it presaged and prepared for the coming of the kingdom in Jesus Christ.

Thus some were Nazirites for life and others for a season, but however long an individual remained under his vow, during that time he lived as one wholly separated to the Lord, attesting his consecration to Him by his ceremonial purity, abstinence and refusal to even groom himself – actions which powerfully symbolized his devotion and self-denial.

Luke's description of Paul's vow points toward it being that of the Nazirite, but a key feature of the Nazirite prescription has led many to conclude otherwise. That feature is the intimate involvement of Israel's priests in the process of fulfilling the vow. First of all, any uncleanness incurred during the time of separation had to be remediated by a priest. But beyond that, the Nazirite vow itself had to be completed in connection with a series of sacrifices performed by a priest on the Nazirite's behalf (Numbers 6:8-21). These sacrifices needed to be offered at Yahweh's sanctuary, but in this case Paul was across the Mediterranean in Corinth.

Some have answered this difficulty by suggesting that Paul kept his shorn hair with him and completed his vow later when he was in Jerusalem. (Some readings in the Majority Text tradition mention Paul's intention to go to Jerusalem for an upcoming feast, possibly Passover or Pentecost.)

Another possibility is that Paul hadn't taken the Nazirite vow in the strict sense of the Mosaic prescription and therefore didn't need to fulfill all of its particulars as demanded by the Law. Rather, he bound himself to a vow of separation to God consistent with the *spirit* of the Nazirite law, but as such vows have attained their true meaning in Christ. The strongest support for this view is Paul's overall theology of christological fulfillment and what that fulfillment means for the Law of Moses in all of its features, specifications and demands.

- 3) If Paul had indeed taken a vow of separation, it raises the question of why he would do so. What provoked his decision to consecrate himself in this way and what, if anything, was the relationship between the completion of the vow and his departure from Corinth? Here, too, Luke provides no insight, but it's reasonable to conclude that the vow was provoked by Jesus' appearance to Paul. There's no explicit indication of this, but two things in Luke's narrative point in this direction.
- The first is that he situated Jesus' appearance so as to be the centerpiece of his account of the Corinthian ministry.
 - Secondly, he intentionally provided no explanation of Paul's vow.

Taken together, these narrative features at least suggest that Luke intended his readers to link the two things. Certainly he'd have recognized that they would tend to do so, and yet he made no effort to redirect their thinking.

- 4) Assuming that Paul's vow was provoked by Jesus' appearance, the logical inference is that Paul believed this deliberate act of self-consecration was an appropriate response to it. It's easy to see how Paul would reach this conclusion: On the one hand, Jesus used His appearance to reaffirm Paul's status as His chosen vessel set apart to do His will; on the other, Jesus reaffirmed His own commitment to Paul and to the success of the work to which He'd consecrated him. Jesus appeared to Paul in order to refocus and reinvigorate his labors as His consecrated servant; what could better testify that this christophany had accomplished its goal than Paul undertaking a conscious and tangible vow of separation to His Lord?

Paul clearly didn't *need* to take such a vow; his life had been consecrated to the Lord and His gospel since his encounter with Him and commission at Damascus. But if he did indeed take a vow of consecration, this action wouldn't have introduced some new feature or level of commitment to Paul's ministry; rather, it would have simply reaffirmed and strengthened what already characterized it.

- c. From Cenchrea, Paul and Priscilla and Aquila (and likely Silas and Timothy) sailed east to Ephesus, where Paul returned to his normal practice of testifying to the Jews in the local synagogue (18:19). This turn of events is notable in that the Spirit had previously forbidden Paul and his companions to enter into Asia and minister the gospel there (ref. again 16:6). It was that prohibition that had led the men to Troas and across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia and then south to Athens and Achaia (16:7ff). Now, some two years later, they were in Ephesus – the leading city of Asia they were probably headed for when the Spirit redirected them – doing the very thing He had previously disallowed. This shows that the Spirit's prohibition wasn't absolute, but a matter of providential timing. Christ intended His gospel to go to Asia and bear its fruit in that region, but in its proper time and sequence according to His wise and inscrutable purpose.
- d. It's noteworthy that Luke's only comment on Paul's first visit to Ephesus is that it was brief and had a measure of positive reception among the city's Jews (18:19). Considered within the larger context, it's evident that Luke merely sketched the details of Paul's return to Antioch because he wanted to advance his narrative to the apostle's later ministry in Ephesus (cf. 18:20-22 with 19:1-41, 20:13-38). Luke gives further evidence of this concern in two particulars contained in his brief treatment: Paul's refusal to continue on at Ephesus, *but with the pledge to return if the Lord willed* (18:21), and the decision to leave Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus, *which suggests their work in laying a foundation for Paul's future ministry in that city* (18:24-19:1). Some scholars even speculate that Paul left them at Ephesus with the expectation of again living with them when he returned.

Luke's narrative emphasis is clear, but it wasn't motivated by the mere fact that Paul spent three years in Ephesus upon his return. Rather, he knew what the Spirit had accomplished during that time, establishing a vital and significant body of believers that would eventually render Ephesus a major hub of the early Church.