

THE JOURNEY WITH THE OFFERING

I have discovered over the years that quite a few Christians are fairly vague about some of the drama that swirled around the life of the Apostle Paul. Part of it is that Paul's story is hidden in passages that are talking about the Message and the Mission, and not really focused on the details of Paul's life. There are lots of unfamiliar names, and we don't really know the terrain or the circumstances very well. Much of the time we just skip over the details, looking for the high points that can maybe help us to live our own lives more faithfully.

Yet I discovered, a few years back, that sometimes it's the details – and the stories they reveal – that help me to understand the highlights. Sometimes, in fact, they are the very things that make me want to stay faithful when the highlights are starting to seem vague and theoretical. Luke (author of Acts) is often so busy trying to tell us the big picture that he often barely mentions little details surrounding the big events. I suspect that Luke thought most everybody knew the little details, which doubtless lots of people did back in his time. But not two thousand years later. If we bother to get familiar with some of the details and ponder their significance, we frequently find half-hidden stories waiting for us that bring everything to life with new focus and ever-greater clarity.

How many of you have thought about and pondered the offering that Paul wanted to take to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey? Oh yeah, the church is always asking for money, even way back then. But why? Because we are supposed to “love our neighbor,” silly; everybody knows that. And it takes money to love our neighbor. That sounds logical to us. I suspect it is wrong on all counts.

So I will ask again: Why did Paul want to take this large offering to Jerusalem? It is the first major attempt we know of by the Christian church to bring help to the needy. In this case, there has been a famine in Israel, and Paul is collecting money from all the churches he knows about so that he can bring assistance to the Christians in Jerusalem. Many of us suspect that this offering is more about healing the rift between the Gentile churches of Greece and Asia and the Jewish church in Jerusalem than it is about poverty or hunger. There are plenty of poor people in and around all the churches we know about. If that's the real

issue, there is no need to go to all the trouble to collect an offering and transport it to Jerusalem.

In any case, Paul has it in mind that if he can collect money from every church he has started – from Galatia to Macedonia – it might be an amazing thing to bring such a gift to the church in Jerusalem. It would be a huge statement about the caring and unanimity of Christians all over the known world. But I feel certain that Paul's biggest motive is to prove to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (the home church where it all started) that Gentile Christians care about them, and love Jesus, and have every bit as much right to be considered true Christians as any Jewish Christians do. I may be wrong, but that is my best guess.

In any case, Paul has been talking up this offering in all the churches he started – talking about it when he visits, mentioning it in letters, and doubtless urging his friends to mention it if they visit or write to any of their Christian friends as well. No telephone, email, or text-messaging means that such an effort has probably taken at least a couple of years to organize, possibly even longer.

Now Paul is getting ready to call in all the chips. It is toward the end of the third missionary journey. He has stayed in Ephesus during most of this third journey (three years at least). His strategy in this regard has been slightly refined from his earlier years. He's learned that from a major center like Ephesus, the Message could go out in all directions, and, with the help of sincere Christian friends, Paul could start new churches in towns all over the Asian territory without going to all those places himself. Paul seems to have realized this in Corinth, but it is even more defined by the time he reaches Ephesus.

By the way, ships are sailing back and forth between Ephesus and Corinth (Cenchreae) all the time. So Paul is able to maintain pretty good contact with the churches in the Corinthian area, even as he labors in Ephesus and its surrounding territory. In other words, Paul keeps learning – and becoming more effective all the time. But the other side of this same coin is that Paul is increasingly hated by every Jewish community that does not believe Jesus is the Messiah. Because Paul has become so well known and so effective, most of these Jewish communities consider him a direct threat to their way of life, and to their conviction that obeying the laws of Moses (Torah) is the only way to please, serve, or be faithful to God.

So Paul has two problems facing him. An increasing number of Jews would love to slit his throat because of the Message he is preaching. At the same time, he is about to take a rather large sum of money all the way from Corinth to Jerusalem. There are no armored cars to take it in. Because it has been necessary to coordinate and organize this offering, the news is out. That means that every thief, brigand, crook, and pirate in the greater Mediterranean world knows about this offering and would love to get their hands on it. Most of them would have no compunctions about murdering Paul – or his companions, if necessary – in order to get their hands on this amount of money. Am I making this clear enough? At this point in time, most people think Paul has very little chance of making it to Jerusalem alive with this offering. Lots of friends are telling Paul precisely this, and very clearly too. But unless we understand the larger setting, we have little awareness of how sincere and genuinely worried and concerned his friends really are.

About this time, a huge riot occurs in the temple at Ephesus. The silversmiths are hoping to close down Paul for their own reasons; his preaching against idolatry has cut into their profits more and more, so they are determined to kill him or drive him out of Ephesus. How could a man who is preaching about a radical new love, forgiveness of sins, and grace and mercy and compassion beyond anything the world has ever believed before be making so many enemies and causing an increasing number of riots wherever he goes? If we do not understand this, we have very little understanding of the principles of life, or how life really works.

In any case, it seems like a propitious time to leave Ephesus anyway. So Paul goes to Corinth, where he intends to meet up with all the emissaries bringing the offerings from their various churches. Then Paul intends to set sail from Corinth, heading toward Jerusalem (Caesarea), and he wants the representatives from the contributing churches to come with him. First of all, there is more safety if he travels with companions. But Paul also wants to make sure that word gets back to every church that contributed to the offering – not just word from him, but word from whomever that church has entrusted to carry the money to Paul. He wants to make sure that nobody will ever be able to claim that he pocketed any of the money. He wants eyewitnesses to be able to go back home and tell the members of their churches that this was all aboveboard – that Paul meant exactly what he said, and the offering all went to the Jerusalem church as Paul had promised.

If anything happens to the offering – even if it’s because of a band of cutthroats and nobody could have prevented it from happening – the word would go out that something was fishy, that something was crooked. So Paul is planning in every way he can – he is planning to do everything he possibly can – to make sure this offering gets to Jerusalem as promised. It’s more than a little scary, no matter how you cut it.

Paul stays three months in Corinth. Doubtless he is preaching and teaching and trying to strengthen the church in Corinth and the surrounding areas. But he is also waiting for the emissaries with their offerings to show up. There are no trains or planes, and traveling anywhere is far from a precision affair. They will arrive when they arrive. Doubtless some of them are already being careful about the amount of money they are carrying.

Eventually Paul books passage on a ship sailing out of Corinth (Cenchreae) and bound, probably, for Caesarea. But it is approaching Passover time, so there will be lots of Jews onboard ship. Paul learns that some of them are assassins whose primary purpose is to kill him. If you think this is far-fetched, you don’t understand the situation. A few months later, for instance, we know for sure that forty Jewish men took an oath to neither eat nor drink until they had assassinated Paul. The animosity is very real. There is no exaggeration here, and no effort is needed to make the story more dramatic.

Paul acts like he will sail with the ship, but, at the last minute and probably under cover of darkness, he heads north, on foot, toward Macedonia. We can only surmise that a number of assassins woke up onboard ship the next morning, out at sea, only to discover that Paul wasn’t onboard – that they were bound for Israel without him. But at least this thinned out some of Paul’s would-be slayers. Meanwhile Paul is hightailing it for Philippi, and a lot of friends with a lot of money are now coming overland with him. Whatever plans have been made by either assassins or thieves, they now have to regroup. It buys Paul a little time. They have to figure out where he has gone and how to intercept him. But Paul will duck and dodge them as if he were in some early James Bond movie. You don’t think so? Track it with me.

As we just mentioned, Paul had prepared to sail from Corinth for Syria – with the offering, and in time to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. Just before the ship sails, he receives warning of a plot by the Jews against his life. (Assassination; not just some angry words.) There would

be many Jews aboard, heading to Jerusalem for Passover, and that would provide lots of cover for the bad guys. So Paul changes plans and goes by land back through Macedonia to Thessalonica and Philippi. From Philippi on, Luke is with him. The text in Acts starts using “we,” not “they.” Luke is not just reporting; it is his firsthand account of what is happening.

We have the list of Paul’s traveling companions, and the churches they represent: Luke – Philippi; Sopater – Berrea; Aristarchus and Secundus – Thessalonica; Gaius – Derbe; Timothy – Lystra; Tychicus and Trophimus – Ephesus (Asia).

Apparently Paul sends his friends by ship from Thessalonica (except for Luke) on to Troas to wait for him. They are clearly ducking and dodging in the hope of confusing or throwing off any would-be assassins or brigands. Of course, we do not know how the money is divided up, but in all likelihood they have spread it out among them. Then Paul goes on by foot to Philippi to pick up Luke.

After a five-day sail (it usually takes three) from Neapolis (port of Philippi), they all meet at Troas, where they stay for seven days. (Acts 20:5-12) “Upon the first day of the week,” in an upper chamber while talking into the night (preaching until midnight), Eutychus falls from the third-floor window to the pavement below. After embracing him and finding him alive, Paul goes back to the upper room, shares a communion meal with his friends, and discusses issues and answers questions until sunrise. Obviously they are very excited about the Faith. (I have known some folk who would bitch and moan if a service lasted ten or fifteen minutes longer than they thought it should. It causes one to wonder why they are so *unexcited* about their Faith.)

Then all of Paul’s companions go by ship to Assos, but Paul goes alone on land – by foot. Clearly he is still ducking the thieves and assassins. Paul had been planning to go to Rome and then to Spain after this trip to Jerusalem, but he is having premonitions as well as outside warnings of trouble ahead. Perhaps this is his “Garden of Gethsemane” time. At least he is “bound in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem” (his phrase), and nothing will dissuade him, though he quite agrees with those who are warning him about what awaits him in Jerusalem. Could it be the influence of the story of Jesus, who went to Jerusalem despite all the dangers that awaited Him?

At Assos, where he is joined again by Luke and other companions, Paul boards the ship and proceeds to Mitylene. The ship is sailing the coast by day and coming into harbor at night, waiting for the morning breeze. Island-hopping is even safer than stopping at towns or cities on the mainland. Thus to Chios, where Homer was born, then to Trogyllium on a promontory opposite Samos. The next day, after a few hours, he arrives in Miletus (40 miles south of Ephesus), birthplace of philosophers (Thales, Anaximander, Democritus). As the ship is unloading and loading cargo, Paul sends word to the elders at Ephesus to come visit him. He has plenty of time, but he doesn't dare go back to Ephesus himself. Thieves and assassins will surely be waiting in Ephesus. Since he didn't sail from Corinth as expected, it seems highly logical to them that Paul will eventually show up in Ephesus and take ship from there to Syria. But much like Jesus, Paul is far cagier than they realize. *“And now, behold, I know that all you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will see my face no more.”* (Acts 20:25) But we should read the whole passage – the great farewell speech from Miletus:

From Miletus he sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to meet him. When they came to him, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus. And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace.

“And now I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will ever see my face again. Therefore I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own

group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. There was much weeping among them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again. Then they brought him to the ship. (Acts 20:17-38)

Luke then recounts the journey to Cos (about a six-hour run), home of the medical school of Aesculapius; around the promontory of Cnidus; and so to Rhodes (both island and city), where Colossus had stood over a hundred feet high, astride the harbor, until destroyed by an earthquake long before Paul's day (another of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world).

At Patara, Paul and his companions change from their small vessel to a larger ship, which runs straight for Tyre. They stay seven days at Tyre (while the ship is loading and unloading), and Paul finds a goodly community of Christians there with which to enjoy fellowship while he waits. You do notice that now (approximately 57 A.D.), at the end of the third journey, Paul can hardly touch down anywhere without finding a group of Christians there. At the beginning of the first journey (47 A.D.), Syrian Antioch was the only known Christian church outside of Israel. It took only ten years to spread the Christian church nearly everywhere in the Roman Empire. When was the last time the entire Conference of the UCC in Southern California or Washington or Wisconsin started a single church?

Then it's on to Ptolemais (where Napoleon had been repulsed by the Turks) for one day, where Paul meets with disciples. Paul probably goes by land to Caesarea, where he stays at the house of Philip the evangelist ("one of the seven") for several days. While there, the prophet Agabus comes from Jerusalem to warn Paul of arrest and imprisonment (Agabus had previously prophesied a famine): *And coming to us, he took Paul's girdle and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "Thus says*

the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this girdle and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" His friends of course begged him not to go on. Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 21:11-13) And so, on to Jerusalem, to stay at the house of Mnason, one of the first converts from Cyprus.

Paul arrives in Jerusalem and meets with James and the elders of the church there. With him he brings the offering for the poor from Greece, Macedonia, Asia, Phrygia, and Galatia. And he tells of all his work, and how the Lord is expanding grace and community – and full acceptance into the Christian church – to Gentiles everywhere. It must have been a rare moment, especially when many of his Christian detractors were present, including James.

On the other hand, we never hear a single word about the reaction or response of the Jerusalem church regarding the offering. It had cost Paul, and his friends, years of planning and effort, and of course it had cost them to contribute the money itself. Getting it to Jerusalem was no small miracle. It could easily have cost Paul his life. But no word of thanks or appreciation do we ever hear. Sometimes that happens to us, doesn't it? What we think will be hugely important and impressive – what we focus on and put a huge amount of effort and planning and energy into – just dribbles away into the twilight, virtually unnoticed, and, from all apparent evidence, accomplishes nothing.

But then, from time to time, something we did – sort of in passing, without hardly paying any attention at all – turns out to be incredibly significant. Can you think of personal experiences that would illustrate either of these phenomena?

Anyway, I wanted you to know that sometimes the Apostle Paul could act very much like Robin Hood or the Scarlet Pimpernel.