

This is the last of our talks on women in the bible whose stories are overlooked. There is a slight issue here because today I want to look at a woman who is always mentioned with her husband. Normally this might be an occasion where the woman's role would be minimised but this couple are slightly different.

Their story appears first in the book of Acts and I want to read it as it gives us an insight into their ministry. Acts 18 *After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. ⁴ Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.*

⁵ When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. ⁶ But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

⁷ Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. ⁸ Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.

⁹ One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." ¹¹ So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

¹² While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. ¹³ "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law."

¹⁴ Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. ¹⁵ But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." ¹⁶ So he drove them off. ¹⁷ Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.

Priscilla, Aquila and Apollos

¹⁸ Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken. ¹⁹ They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. ²¹ But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus. ²² When he landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.

²³ After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and travelled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

²⁴ Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

²⁷ When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. ²⁸ For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

In the year 52 A.D. the Roman emperor Claudius issued an edict expelling all Jews from the city of Rome. It seems, from what the Roman historian Suetonius says, that they were persecuting their Christian neighbours and causing considerable disturbance in the city. Claudius didn't care about the reason for the trouble or who the guilty parties were. He knew they were Jews, and that was enough; so all Jews were uprooted from their homes and banished from Rome - the innocent along with the guilty. This included a Jew named Aquila, who had migrated to Rome from the province of Pontus on the Black Sea, and he decided to migrate to the city of Corinth with his wife, Priscilla. We do not know for certain whether she was Jewish or Roman, nor are we sure whether or not they were both Christians at the time. 52 AD would be approaching two decades after Peter's Pentecost sermon of Acts chapter two. After Pentecost

thousands of people carried their new faith home so it is possible that they had heard the gospel in Pontus.

This couple whose names are always mentioned together did some marvellous work for the Lord. By the fact that Priscilla's name is mentioned first more times (against the custom), it is reasonable to assume that Priscilla was sort of the leader among them. Let us see the events in their lives and see what we can learn from those events

1. They worked together, ministered together, and are mentioned together always: A true model couple. While it is clear that males followed the occupation of their fathers, there is no rule that the wife joined the profession of the husband. We do not see this practice in the other NT couples (Mary and Joseph) or Peter's wife etc. but we do see that Priscilla chose to work together with her husband and make a living together. When one reads the New Testament, it is striking how few couples are mentioned in the first century church. We find men, both married and single, who are prominent and we find women who are prominent in the church but we find very few couples. Of those few, Aquila and Priscilla, especially stand out. It is also noteworthy to note that even after they got into ministry, they continued their profession, and earned their living.

2. God uses this profession to connect Priscilla with Paul. It appears that when Paul arrived in town fresh from an evangelistic crusade in Athens, he started looking for people in the tent making profession to do some work, and make sure that he was earning. Paul always worked for his living and he was a tentmaker too, so the Lord brought them together and Priscilla was hospitable enough to invite Paul into their home and let him stay with them. (Acts 18:1-3). A lasting friendship was born between them. We see God using Priscilla's hospitality to put his plans into action to build the church in Corinth.

3. If Priscilla and Aquila did not know the Lord before, having Paul to stay would probably have sealed the issue for them. No one could be in Paul's presence for a reasonably long time and not be infected by his passion for the Lord. After all, we are talking about the Paul who almost converted King Agrippa. We see the shift in focus of Paul's ministry and the fruits that his ministry was bearing (Acts 18:4-11). Paul stayed with Priscilla and Aquila for 18 months. We see here, Priscilla and Aquila playing perfect hosts, happy to remain the background and supporting the great missionary. Later events will show that during this stay Priscilla and Aquila became very strong in the word, and that is not surprising; they had a great teacher in Paul. We see God using Priscilla to launch a great ministry by Paul.

4. They followed Paul when he went to Ephesus. (Acts 18: 18) They did not know what they were supposed to do in Ephesus at that time, and the purpose is revealed much later. But like Abraham, they followed God's plans and moved lock stock and barrel with Paul from Corinth, where they had settled down, to Ephesus, just to be with Paul, and be part of his ministry. Responding to God's call to move from our comfort zone is important so that God can use us mightily later. That call is not necessarily geographical – it can be simply to try a new thing where you are.

5. However, when they reached Ephesus, Paul left them again and proceeded to his home church at Antioch. This time, again according to God's plans, Priscilla and Aquila stayed back at Ephesus. (Acts 18:20). This was a key move. It is because they stayed back in Ephesus that they were able to meet another great preacher (Acts 18:24-26). While Paul was gone Apollos came to Ephesus and Priscilla and Aquila went to hear him and were deeply impressed by his sincerity, his love for God, his knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, and his brilliant oratorical ability. He could be mightily used in the service of Jesus Christ, but his message was deficient. All he knew beyond the Old Testament was the message of John the Baptist, which merely looked forward to the coming Messiah. Acts 18:26 *When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately*" (Acts 18:26). They lovingly and patiently rehearsed the life and ministry of Jesus Christ on earth, His sacrificial and substitutionary death on Calvary's cross for the sins of the world, His victorious resurrection from the tomb and glorious ascension into heaven, the necessity for personal salvation from sin by faith in His finished work, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the birth of the Body of Christ, and other great New Testament doctrines. He effectively had his own Alpha course.

Priscilla and Aquila may not have been accomplished public speakers, but they were diligent students of the Word, and they loved to share it with others. They were even willing to invest the time necessary to take one young man under their spiritual care and pour into his life the things of Christ. Apollos had a keen mind and a quick understanding. He absorbed the truth they taught him and made it a part of his life and ministry. And as a result of this encounter with Aquila and Priscilla, he became an effective servant of God whom some of the Corinthians later placed on a level with Peter and Paul (1 Cor. 1:12). This is one of the biggest lessons I want to draw from Priscilla's life, the leadership principle of "passing on".

When we come to Christ for salvation, God calls us to make more disciples (Matt. 28:19) Similarly when God calls us to leadership, He directs us to help equip others to lead more effectively.

6. The further happenings show us that they nurtured and developed a church in their home in Ephesus, and Paul was able to see it himself when he returned to Ephesus later on. 1 Corinthians 16:19 *The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla^[a] greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.*

They used their home to do the ministry that Paul entrusted them to do. Ephesus was a former Greek city located on the mouth of the Cayster River on the western coast of Asia Minor; it was the capital of provincial Asia, and the leading commercial city of Asia Minor. Ephesus was famous for her goddess, Artemis. Ephesus sure needed a strong ministry since it was a wicked city. Priscilla and Aquila performed this ministry very well.

7. When Paul left Ephesus for Greece, they evidently believed God was directing them back to Rome. Claudius was dead now, so the move may have seemed safe, and Rome surely needed a gospel witness. So off they went! Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans from Greece on that third missionary journey, and that's when he wrote the greeting in our reading today. Romans 16:3-5 *Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴ They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.*

They had hardly gotten to Rome and already there was a church meeting in their house. Churches in New Testament times could not afford to own land and build buildings, nor would it have been wise to do so if they could, in view of the continual pressure and persecution. They met in homes. And the home of Priscilla and Aquila was always open to people who wanted to learn more about Christ, and for Christians who wanted to grow in the Word. There was one short statement in the greeting that we cannot afford to pass over lightly, however: *They risked their lives for me.* We do not know what Paul was referring to, nor when it happened, but somewhere, somehow, Priscilla and Aquila together endangered their own lives to save Paul's. And for that we also can give thanks to God. His two friends were willing to give everything in the service of the Saviour, even their lives. What a testimony!!

8. Aquila and Priscilla are mentioned one more time in the New Testament, in the last chapter of the last book the Apostle Paul wrote. It had been sixteen years since Paul first met them at Corinth, and now he was in a Roman prison for the second time. His death at the hands of the emperor Nero was imminent, and he was writing the last paragraph of his long and fruitful life. 2 Timothy 4:19 *Greet Priscilla and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus*". He is thinking of his dear friends who were then back in Ephesus where Timothy was ministering, possibly having left Rome to escape Nero's latest outburst of persecution against Christians. It was just a brief and simple greeting, but Paul

wanted to be remembered to them in the last hours of his life. Imagine the impression that Priscilla and Aquila left in the mind of the apostle Paul.