

Priscilla . . . and Junia

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a six-part series

September 6, 2015

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Acts 18:1–4, 18, 24–28 (CEB)

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ²There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus. He had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul visited with them. ³Because they practiced the same trade, he stayed and worked with them. They all worked with leather. ⁴Every Sabbath he interacted with people in the synagogue, trying to convince both Jews and Greeks. . . .

¹⁸After Paul stayed in Corinth for some time, he said good-bye to the brothers and sisters. At the Corinthian seaport of Cenchræe he had his head shaved, since he had made a solemn promise. Then, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila, he sailed away to Syria. . . .

²⁴Meanwhile, a certain Jew named Apollos arrived in Ephesus. He was a native of Alexandria and was well-educated and effective in his use of the scriptures. ²⁵He had been instructed in the way of the Lord and spoke as one stirred up by the Spirit. He taught accurately the things about Jesus, even though he was aware only of the baptism John proclaimed and practiced. ²⁶He began speaking with confidence in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they received him into their circle of friends and explained to him God's way more accurately. ²⁷When he wanted to travel to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples so they would open their homes to him. Once he arrived, he was of great help to those who had come to believe through grace. ²⁸He would vigorously defeat Jewish arguments in public debate, using the scriptures to prove that Jesus was the Christ.

Romans 16:1–7 (CEB)

I'm introducing our sister Phoebe to you, who is a deacon of the church in Cenchræe. ²Welcome her in the Lord in a way that is worthy of God's people, and give her whatever she needs from you, because she herself has been a sponsor of many people, myself included.

³Say hello to Prisca and Aquila, my coworkers in Christ Jesus, ⁴who risked their own necks for my life. I'm not the only one who thanks God for them, but all the churches of the Gentiles do the same. ⁵Also say hello to the church that meets in their house. Say hello to Epaenetus, my dear friend, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. ⁶Say hello to Mary, who has worked very hard for you. ⁷Say hello to Andronicus and Junia, my relatives and my fellow prisoners. They are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

Priscilla and Junia. Just two of the women who played vital roles in the growth of the early church. Why would women be denied the same roles today?

And so we come to the last week in this series. I hope you have a better appreciation for the surprising role that women played in the story of God's people, given the patriarchal system in the biblical world. From Rahab to Huldah to Priscilla, God has asked women to take on tasks and roles that would ordinarily be denied women in their world. With this final study, we move from the women in the four gospels to those who played a crucial role in carrying the Good News to the larger Greco-Roman world.

Priscilla's story

The riots had gone on too long. The Emperor barely tolerated the Jews as it was. Now, he had been pushed too far; Caesar ordered their expulsion from Rome. Priscilla, Aquila, their friends and neighbors . . . all of them. As they fled, they had little hope of ever returning.

In the days of Jesus and Paul, Jews lived throughout the Roman Empire, from Syria in the east to Spain in the west. Even Rome itself had a substantial Jewish population of perhaps 40,000 or so. The Romans generally left such Jews alone. To the average Roman, the Jews seemed more peculiar than threatening. The Jews believed that there was only one god (yeah, sure) and that this god had chosen them (how silly a thought). The Jews took off work on Saturdays (nice work if you can get it!) and avoided all sorts of foods. They even performed some strange rite of physical mutilation on their newborn males. But . . . so long as the peace was kept, the Romans left the Jews in peace.

Keeping the peace was important throughout the empire. Controlling millions of conquered peoples was no small task. But nowhere was this peacekeeping more highly prized than in Rome and in 49AD the peace in Rome came crashing down. Suetonius¹, a Roman biographer of the times, wrote “Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous

Jewish-Christians?

For many of us, Jews and Christians are in two separate categories that we don't mix together. So when we read in the New Testament about Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians it can be rather confusing.

ALL the first followers of Jesus (“Christians,” we call them, as in Acts 11:26) were Jews who embraced Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. They placed their faith in Christ but never understood themselves to be giving up their Jewishness; instead, Jesus was the culmination of Israel's story, not a replacement for it.

Paul was such a Jew. As the movement spread across the empire, increasing numbers of Gentiles (non-Jews) came to faith in Jesus, worshiping alongside the Jewish-Christians. With time, the number of Gentiles overwhelmed the number of Jews in the movement.

disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius, the Caesar] expelled them from Rome.” His reference to “Chrestus” is probably a reference to Christ. Evidently, followers of Jesus had come to Rome preaching Christ in the Jewish synagogues, triggering a violent response from many Jews. After all, something much like this happened nearly everywhere Paul traveled in the eastern end of the empire.

So, the Jews left Rome, forbidden to return. This would have included Jews who had become followers of Jesus, such as the married couple, Priscilla² and Aquila. They were better off than many. They had a portable business; they were tentmakers. They owned property. Priscilla even had had some family money. So they headed toward the large, bustling Greek metropolis of Corinth, Greece. Corinth was a busy, commercial port on a narrow isthmus. There, Priscilla and her husband set up shop in a storefront and began to rebuild their lives.

Not long after their arrival in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila met a fellow Jew who had come to Corinth to proclaim the gospel, the Good News, of Jesus Christ. His name was Paul. The three of them quickly formed a close bond, for

Paul was a tentmaker too. Priscilla and her husband invited Paul to join them in their storefront business and for the next eighteen months the three of them grew their business and grew the young Christian house churches in Corinth.

Moving on

Priscilla and Aquila may have been Christians in Rome. In any event, they committed themselves fully to Paul's work and the building of God's kingdom in Corinth. When Paul decided that it was time for him to leave Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila left with him. All three made their way to Ephesus, another very important city. Priscilla and Aquila stayed there while Paul went on to Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, they quickly became leaders in the Christian community in Ephesus.

Once, a well-meaning Jew named Apollos came to Ephesus teaching about Jesus and God's kingdom as best he could. But his teachings about Jesus were a little confused and inaccurate, especially regarding baptism. Priscilla and her husband took him aside and taught him the full truth about Jesus and the new way. With their guidance and encouragement, Apollos went on to be an effective teacher and leader among the churches in Greece.

Going home

Priscilla and Aquila stayed in Ephesus for several years. Paul would mention them when he wrote a letter back to Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 16:9). But they never lost their desire to return to Rome. After all, it was their home, where they had been raised, where they had met and married. In 54AD, Claudius died and his edict expelling the Jews from Rome died

¹Suetonius lived and wrote about 100 years after Jesus. This quote is from his *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.

²She is referred to as Priscilla in the book of Acts, though Paul refers to her as Prisca in his letters. Think of this as “Kate” and “Katherine,” as Prisca is the formal name.

with him.³ So, Priscilla and her husband returned to Rome where they would carry on their kingdom building work. Later, when Paul was in Corinth a second time, he wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome urging them to find unity as the Jewish-Christians returned. In this letter, Paul sent a poignant hello to Priscilla and Aquila, noting that they had “risked their necks” for Paul and his work (Romans 16:3-4). But even though they were back in Rome, their work was not done. There were many house churches in Rome that needed help and encouragement. Later, it seems that they again headed for Asia Minor to work for the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ (see 2 Timothy 4:19).

There are no extended stories about Priscilla and Aquila in the New Testament. Rather, their presence and service are woven into the accounts of Paul’s ministry and their own. We meet them in the correspondence of the movement. We see that they were leaders in the early church and trusted co-workers of Paul, confident enough to instruct a respected teacher and preacher. They are always mentioned together and Priscilla is nearly always mentioned first!

The Apostle Junia

Priscilla’s role as teacher and leader is fully consistent with that of other women who worked alongside Paul in the formative years of the church. Paul refers to quite a few in the closing to his letter to the Romans. Though Romans 16 is little-read (who really wants to wade through all the strange names!), it is an excellent window into Paul’s ministry. There, we meet Phoebe in verse 1, whom Paul refers to as a deacon/servant (*diakanon*). She carried Paul’s letter to Rome. Can anyone seriously doubt that Paul trusted her to help the believers in Rome grasp Paul’s letter and teaching? Paul refers to Prisca and Aquila as his “co-workers” in Christ. Paul mentions Mary in verse 6. Then, in verse Paul drops the real bombshell, given how much effort has been spent trying to change what Paul wrote, especially in the last two hundred years. Paul commends Andronicus (male) and Junia (female), his relatives and fellow prisoners. Referring to them Paul says “they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me” (Romans 16:7). Thus, it seems clear that Andronicus and Junia have been Christians from the very first days, even before Paul and that they were witnesses to the resurrection.

Despite the witness of the early church and the manuscript evidence, many attempts have been made to change Junia into a man by adding an “s.” to her name.⁴ Indeed, some translators said Paul must have referred to a man because the person was an apostle. But, no, Junia was a woman, an apostle, and a prominent one. The early church fathers all referred to her as such. In his definitive treatment of the topic, Eldon Epps writes:

By far the most influential of these, and among the earliest, was Chrysostom⁵, whose statement is pointed and unambiguous:

"Greet Andronicus and Junia ... who are outstanding among the apostles": To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles-just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle." (*In ep. ad Romanos 31.2; PG 60.669-670*)⁶

So . . . the next time someone tells you that women shouldn’t preach or teach men because of what they mistakenly think Paul means in a few scattered sentences in his letters, refer them to Junia in Romans 16, so they can actually see they can see for themselves that the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Junia worked side-by-side in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to all who would listen.

³When a Caesar died, many of his edicts would automatically expire unless renewed by his successor.

⁴For example, the 1984 edition of the NIV still had “Junias” (male) in Romans 16. Thankfully, the translators now correctly use “Junia” in the 2011 edition.

⁵John Chrysostom was the archbishop of Constantinople and was famous for his eloquent preaching and speaking. His name is from the Greek *chrysostomos* meaning “golden-mouthed.” His accumulated writings are vast.

⁶Eldon Jay Epp. *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Kindle Locations 448-451). Kindle Edition. If you want to dig into the “Junia/Junias” this is the best place to start, though it is a very technical book.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Acts 16:11-15 The story of Lydia's conversion in Philippi	Tuesday, Acts 18 The full story of Paul in Corinth, with Priscilla and Aquila
Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 12 The variety of gifts in the body of Christ	Thursday, 1 Corinthians 13:26 Paul's final greeting to the Corinthians, including a greeting from Priscilla and Aquila (v.19)
Friday, 2 Timothy 2:19-22 Another "say hello" to Prisca and Aquila	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class - now studying Matthew's Gospel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall (No class on Labor Day)

Tuesday Lunchtime Class - now studying Acts

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series:

Biblical stories that will make you feel better about your own family!

Beginning September 13

A follow-on series for the Ask! sermons on some of the big faith questions. We'll go deeper in class and have plenty of time for Q&A.

Second Information Meeting: Fall 2016 Israel Trip with Scott Engle and Arthur Jones

Sunday, Sept. 27 at 6:30 in Festival Hall

We are planning a ten-day trip to Israel, similar to the Fall 2014 trip. If you've ever thought about taking an in-depth tour of Israel, this is the trip to take.

Visit Nazareth, Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Masada, and much more with friends and family. This trip is life-changing. Your faith will be deepened, you will never read the Bible the same way, and you will have a great time. We hope that you will join us!

The deposit deadline is October 1!