

Priscilla

The Woman Who Was Foremost in Service

Scripture References - Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19

Name Meaning - Priscilla is the diminutive of Prisca, feminine of Prisca meaning "primitive," hence, "worthy, or venerable," as belonging to the good old time. This name is also found as a family name in the earliest Roman annals, and appears in the form "Prisca" in Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:19). Cruden says Priscilla means "ancient, old-fashioned simplicity." It is also interesting to note that Aquila, Priscilla's husband, had the family name of the commander of a legion, for it means "eagle" - emblem of the Roman army. Both names are Roman. From the prominence given in Roman inscriptions and legends to the name Prisca it is concluded that she belonged to a distinguished Roman family.

Family Connections - Of Priscilla's background and parentage Scripture is silent. Doubtless, like her husband, she was born in Pontus. Both were Jews of Asia-Minor, and as such were expelled by Claudius from Rome, and in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila became the honored and much-loved friends of Paul. In fact, they were the most distinguished among his fellow-helpers in the cause of Christ. As Priscilla is always paired with her husband, Aquila, it is difficult to separate her and place her on a pedestal of her own. Their two hearts beat as one. Harmoniously, they labored together in the service of the church. They walked as one for they had mutually agreed to put Christ first. In the six references where both are mentioned, the name of Priscilla comes first in three instances, and Aquila first in the other three. They are never mentioned apart. Is there any significance attached to the fact that Aquila is not named first every time, but equally shares mention with his wife? A number of conjectures have been put forth why Priscilla comes first at all in the references to them both. Some writers suggest that she was the more energetic of the two, and perhaps had the stronger character. Dinsdale Young thinks that Priscilla may have been a believer before her husband, and that she won him for the Lord by her "chaste conversation," or that perhaps hers was a primacy of character and service, or a more conspicuous intellectual ability, or that she may have been of nobler birth and social quality than Aquila.

Personally, we see no reason at all for Priscilla's name coming first in half of the Scripture references to her, even though she may recall the wonderful prominence of women in early Christianity, and in martyrdom and service for Christ. If, in any way, Priscilla outshone Aquila, he must have praised God for such a precious gifted wife. Charles Kingsley makes one of his characters in *Westward Ho!* say, "In her he had found a treasure and knew what he had found." This must have been Aquila's sentiment also. Let us now look at the many fascinating facets of the union existing between these two old-time saints.

They Were One in Marital Bliss

What romance, love and blending of personalities are associated with such an ordinary phrase as "Aquila ... with his wife Priscilla." How interesting it would be to know where and how they met, fell in love with each other and married! As nothing is said about any children that through the years came to grace their lovely home, we can take it that Priscilla was childless. From the record we have of Aquila and Priscilla their story is a beautiful idyll of home life. Together from the time of their marriage they are always named together, and were inseparable. What a pleasant picture of wedded love they present! To these two, wedlock was a divine ordinance and indissoluble union, and one which halved their sorrows and doubled their joys. They were not unequally yoked together but joined in the Lord.

In the truest sense, Aquila and Priscilla were "no more twain but one flesh," and all that they covenanted to accomplish together from the hour of their marriage vows was realized as the result of the perfect unity of the spiritual, nature of purpose, and of aim. As twin stars, Aquila and Priscilla were "bright with borrowed rays divine." They moved in one orbit and were united in all their labors as well as in their love. With Nabal and Abigail we have a sad illustration of husband and wife who had nothing in common, who were diametrically opposed to each other in character, and in whom sordidness and sublimity were associated. But with Aquila and Priscilla it was so different, for like Zacharias and Elisabeth they, too, were "both righteous" and like them, manifested a union, idyllic in its full-orbed loveliness and charm. Because the Bible is everybody's Book, it is the married people's Book revealing how the Aquilas and Priscillas can live happily together.

They Were One in the Lord

Further, this Christian couple were one in their experience of God's saving power, and so became one in their holy zeal for the Saviour, and in their service for His church. They were partners in faithful endeavors, not only to present Christ by lip, but also in the excellency of their walk and conversation. The supreme need of our critical time is not for more preachers, but for more lay workers like Aquila and Priscilla ready to exemplify Christ in the common round of life. Paul first discovered this godly pair when he came to Corinth from Athens where they had been driven by the edict of Claudius against the Jews. What an arrestive phrase that is, "Paul *found a certain Jew* named Aquila ... with his wife Priscilla" (Acts 18:2). What a find that was! Fewer, grander discoveries have ever been made. "Paul was a wonderful discoverer. He was always finding, now a truth, now a grace, now a personality. He was ever finding because he was ever seeking." How many have we found for the Lord?

They Were One in Their Profound Knowledge of Scripture

One of the most impressive aspects of the spiritual influence of Priscilla and Aquila was the way in which these two simple souls with a deep knowledge of Christian truth were used to open the eyes of a great Alexandrian divine to the reality of the Gospel. The eloquent and fervent Apollos with all his brilliance and power suffered a sorry limitation as a preacher. He knew only "the baptism of John" (Acts 18:25, 26). He knew nothing of salvation through the cross and the accompaniments of salvation. The larger truths of the Gospel of Redemption were as yet unknown to him. Priscilla and Aquila followed the crowds who went to hear this most popular and persuasive preacher.

As they listened, Priscilla and her husband detected the negative defects of the preaching of Apollos. He taught no positive error, denied no essential of the faith. What he preached was true as far as it went. Apollos knew the truth, but not all the truth, and so in the quiet way, with all humility, Priscilla and Aquila set about correcting the apparent deficiency of Apollos. Inviting him to their home they passed no word of criticism on what they had heard him preach but with consummate tact instructed him Biblically in the truth of the crucified, risen and glorified Saviour. "They expounded unto him the way of God more carefully" (asv) What was the result of that Bible course which Apollos received from those two godly, Spirit-enlightened believers? Why, Apollos became so mighty in the Gospel that he was called an apostle. In fact, he became so effective as a true gospel preacher that some of the Corinthians put him before Peter and Paul. But all that Apollos became he owed, under God, to the quiet instruction of Priscilla and Aquila. In Apollos, Christ gained a preacher whose spiritual influence was second only to Paul himself. Says Alexander Whyte in his chapter dealing with Aquila, Priscilla and Apollos –

I admire all the three so much, that I really do not know which to admire the most; Aquila and Priscilla in their quite extraordinary wisdom and tact and courage, and especially love; or Apollos in his still more extraordinary humility, modesty, and mind of Christ.

If we cannot be great, by God's grace we may be the means of making others great. Quiet, unobtrusive Andrew little knew when he brought his brother Peter to Christ that he would become the mighty Apostle to the Jews. As husband and wife, and humble tentmakers, Aquila and Priscilla greatly enriched the ministries of Paul and Apollos whom God, in turn, used to establish churches.

They Were One in the Service of the Church

Paul gives us a still fuller insight into the passionate desire of Aquila and Priscilla to bind the saints together in fellowship. To the Corinthians he wrote, "Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, *with the church in their house.*" In Romans, the Apostle sent his greetings to them and to "the church that is in their house." At stated times they gathered the followers of Christ for worship, meditation and remembrance at the Family Altar, and thereby invested "the domestic circle with a peculiar sanctity as the germ of that great organism which we call the Church of God."

In those apostolic days, poverty and persecution made separate buildings for worship almost impracticable, and so private, sanctified homes became the house of God. Aquila and Priscilla consecrated their home to God, as a gathering place for the saints. Because of this they became doubly sanctified by the Word of God and prayer. If such a dedicated home is "the masterpiece of the applied Gospel," should we not be careful that nothing enters our home to "unchurch" it? Perhaps the church of God could become a mightier spiritual force in the world if she could return to upper chambers and churches in the home.

As we take farewell of Aquila and Priscilla we remind ourselves that in the history of Christianity the truly great characters have always been simple and humble men and women. The God who made the mountains also made the valleys, and both are needed. Paul, ever conscious of his indebtedness to inconspicuous persons, paid just tribute to Aquila and Priscilla. Whether we are prominent or otherwise, may we be found serving God to the limit of our ability. How much we owe to the quiet and useful lives of the world's Aquilas and Priscillas, as well as its more conspicuous saints we shall never know this side of heaven! The humble tentmakers we have thought of are, "a bracing and cheering study for Christians of every type and condition. They are especially a pertinent ensample for Christian husbands and wives. It will be a true loss if we neglect to contemplate this spiritually-minded pair who walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless."

Just when Aquila and Priscilla became the Lord's, Scripture does not say. Had they been unconverted when Paul found them it would have been impossible for them to remain so, with Paul living in their home for eighteen months, and their contact with the Apostle's constant teaching of the Word of God in the nearby synagogue. The inference is that when Paul met them they were firmly established in the Christian faith, and that in them he found two saintly souls after his own heart. Both Aquila and Priscilla as Hebrews were drenched in Old Testament Scriptures and had found in the promised Messiah, their Saviour and Lord, and were thus able to enter into Paul's remarkable ministry during his stay in Corinth. With honored Paul as their guest, what times the three of them must have had together in prayer and meditation upon the Word. What spiritual knowledge Aquila and Priscilla must have acquired from the Early Church's greatest Bible teacher. Theirs must have been a thorough theological course.

They Were One in Secular Occupation

Luke informs us that "by their occupation they were tentmakers" (Acts 18:3). This must have added to Paul's delight in living with Aquila and Priscilla for he was of the same craft, and at times supported himself in this way (Acts 20:34; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). When not preaching and teaching we can imagine Paul, Aquila and Priscilla sitting together in Aquila's shop as they plied their needles and fashioned or repaired tents. Aquila and Priscilla shared the duties of their workshop. They were not ashamed of manual toil. Proud of their craft, we can believe that the product of their joint labors was known for its excellent quality. The tents from their establishment made of honest goat's hair, sewn with honest thread, seamed and disposed of at an honest price, gave Aquila and Priscilla a wide reputation. They were in the tent business first of all, for the glory of God. As Jews, Paul, Aquila and Priscilla were taught the tent trade when they were young, for the teaching of rabbis was that the father who failed to teach his son a trade educated him to be a thief. Jesus Himself was taught a trade and was thus known not only as "the carpenter's son" but also as, "the Carpenter." We are thus shown the dignity of labor. The craft of Aquila and Priscilla may have been a common one, but it was approached in an uncommon spirit. Their toil was honorable and they honored God in their toil, even as Jesus did when for long years He worked at the bench. Do we turn our particular craft to good account for the Lord? "A particular craft will throw one into association with a particular class of persons, and if one is alert and always about the Master's business, he may find in his particular calling a special opportunity for testimony from which others, not of the same craft, are circumstantially excluded."

They Were One in Their Friendship for Paul

As we read the references to Aquila and Priscilla we cannot fail to be impressed with the affection they had for Paul, and of the way he held them in high esteem. Of all the Apostle's coworkers none were to prove themselves as loyal and helpful as these two. As a lonely man, and in constant need of friendship and comfort, none cared for Paul as that home-making couple provided for him. Their oneness in spiritual things made Aquila and Priscilla so precious to the heart of Paul who designated them "my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3, asv). They were *workers not shirkers in the divine vineyard, and their labors with and for the Apostle were not in vain, seeing they wrought "in Christ Jesus."* They shared Paul's itinerant ministry.

They went to Ephesus and to Rome assisting their friend in every way. As missionaries they scattered the good seed of the Gospel wherever they went (Acts 18:18; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19).

This is why Paul was generous in his recognition and acknowledgment of indebtedness to these godly souls, who, for love of Christ labored with him so devotedly in the Gospel. When Paul left Corinth after a residence of a year and a half in the home of Priscilla and Aquila, they left with him for Ephesus. After some time he "left them there," and sailed to Jerusalem. Being "left there" was in the providence of God as we shall see when we come to their contact with Apollos there. In the furtherance of the Gospel Paul tells us that Priscilla and Aquila laid down their own necks for his sake, earning thereby not only his heartfelt gratitude, but also that of all the Gentile churches which Paul had founded. Moule translates this passage, "For my life's sake submitted their own throats to the knife" (Romans 16:3, 4) - referring to some stern crisis otherwise utterly unknown to us but well-known in heaven. In some way or another, possibly during the great Ephesian riots, they had saved the man whom the Lord consecrated to the service of the Gentile world.

The way Paul describes their readiness to sacrifice themselves on his behalf conveys the thought that they had been exposed to martyrdom for his sake. He never forgot the self-sacrifice of Priscilla and Aquila who, for the most part of their lives worked at their trade as tentmakers but who were capable of noble deeds equal to the occasion. In perilous circumstances they exhibited a martyr-like self-sacrifice, and thereby emulated the example of the Master whom they so faithfully served. Can we say that we are ready to lay down our necks for apostolic causes? Must we not confess with shame our effort to save our necks as much as possible.

While the last mention of Aquila and Priscilla is to be found in Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy where they were back at Ephesus about the year a.d. 66 (2 Timothy 4:19), there is a tradition to the effect that they ultimately laid down their lives for Christ's sake. The 8th of July is the day set apart for them in the martyrology of the Roman Church when it is said the faithful couple were led out beyond the walls and beheaded. If this is so it is not difficult to fill in the details of the pathetic picture. Aquila and Priscilla had loved each other through the years, and together had served the Lord so loyally. Now with eyes so full of unfading love, as if to say to each other "Farewell, fear not!" they were ready for the flash of the blade that sent them home to God, and to eternal fellowship with Paul, Apollos, and others they had so signally helped.