

ACTS 20:1 thru 21:8 – A FALL, FAREWELL & FOREWARNING

Last time we looked at Paul's thriving ministry in Ephesus. That was our focus. He spent about two and a half years there before being prompted to move on. His teaching ministry in Ephesus attracted a lot of people from all over Asia. They came to hear him speak and they believed his message. These new converts then went back home and started churches in places like Colossae and Laodicea and Philadelphia and Thyatira. It was a significant period in Paul's ministry.

READ Acts 20:1

There was a riot in Ephesus. We saw that last time. That convinced Paul that it was time to leave Ephesus, a place that was near and dear to his heart. Paul knew that for him to accomplish what God had called him to do, he had to leave Ephesus at some point. He just did not want to because he loved the people there so much. He knew he had to move on.

READ Acts 20:2

So, Paul has several short-term ministry goals. One is to revisit these churches that he started on his second missionary journey (Philippi, Thessalonica, etc.). Another desire is to go down to Corinth, which is in Greece.

We looked at this verse last time: "Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome'" (Acts 19:21). So, this is what is on Paul's heart.

Paul leaves Ephesus. His route takes him up the road north to Troas. He then crosses the Aegean Sea to Philippi. He is going to spend a little time in Philippi. While he is there, Paul writes Second Corinthians (he wrote First Corinthians from Ephesus a year earlier). Paul renews his friendships with the many of the believers in Philippi – people like Lydia, the Philippian jailer and Epaphroditus (mentioned in the letter to the Philippians).

He had left Luke in Philippi and has been there this whole time. So, he and Paul connect again. By the way, we know from Paul's letter to the Philippians that he had a very special relationship with this church.

From Paul writings in Second Corinthians, we can fill in many of the details about what is happening during this time. These events are not recorded in the book of Acts. We know Paul's state of mind as he arrives in Philippi. He is in deep depression about something. Paul has just arrived in Philippi and writes these words: "For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself" (2 Corinthians 1:8).

What is Paul so burdened about? Bible scholars have tried to figure this out because he never actually says what it is. There are several possibilities I will throw out there. It could have been related to stress he experienced from that riot in Ephesus. That was a traumatic event because he could have died. It could have been a flare up of some near-fatal illness that Paul suffered. Paul later in the book of Second Corinthians is going to mention the "thorn in the flesh." We do not know what that is but it is something that really bothered Paul. It could have been a physical ailment. We do not know. It could refer to a time of imprisonment that he had not mentioned in Acts. Or maybe some more opposition from his fellow Jews. All that would have been very stressful. It could be related to the strain of this relationship that had gone afoul with the believers at Corinth. We don't any of the details but we know from the book of First Corinthians that there were some issues. It could have been related to any one of these things. But Paul is burdened about something.

We know that Paul is very concerned for the Corinthian believers. He is making his way down there. From Second Corinthians 2:13 we learn that Paul is eagerly waiting for Titus to arrive with news from Corinth. Titus has been down there dealing with them. Now he is going to come back and fill Paul in on what is going on. We forget living in our day and age how slow communication was back then. There were no telephones. Communication

was by word of mouth only. So, Paul is waiting for Titus to tell him what is going on down in Corinth.

When Titus finally does arrive, Paul gets a much-needed update about that church: "But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you [the believers in Corinth], as he told us of your longing, your mourning [weeping], your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more" (2 Corinthians 7:6-7). Paul receives great news from Titus regarding the Corinthian believers. It is exactly what Paul needs to hear given his state of mind. Now he is more eager than ever to get to Corinth and meet with the believers there.

After spending several months in Philippi, Paul travels through Thessalonica and Berea. Then he heads down the coast to Corinth.

READ Acts 20:3-5

Paul stays in Corinth for three months and then makes plans to return home from the nearby port city. We do not know anything about his ministry activities in Corinth. We know he went down and met with them and talked to them. But we do not know any of the details about that visit. All we know is that it is short-lived. So, it is approximately one year from the time Paul leaves Ephesus to the time he arrives in Corinth.

So, this plot is uncovered. These Jews in Corinth want to kill Paul while he is boarding a ship heading home to Syria. But Paul now changes plans. Instead of sailing east from Corinth toward home, he heads north overland along the Aegean coast then back through Berea, Thessalonica and Philippi. Then from Philippi Paul sails over to Troas.

The eight guys named in v 4, Paul's friends from Corinth, are concerned for his safety. They accompany Paul because they fear for his life. The Jews want to kill him. So, they escort him back through the towns I just mentioned and then go on to Troas. Paul is not alone as he travels from Corinth. These guys are protecting him.

READ Acts 20:6

Luke, the writer of Acts, has been in Philippi this whole time. When Paul travels back through Philippi, now Luke joins him. Notice that Luke begins to use the word "we." This indicates that he is now with Paul. He has rejoined him. He and Paul sail together across the Aegean Sea back to Troas. Those eight guys who had escorted Paul from Corinth are already in Troas.

READ Acts 20:7-8

In these verses we get a vivid picture of the early Christian church. Several things to notice. First, they met on Sundays. It says, v 7, "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together..." They are meeting on Sundays. You might ask, "where is meeting on Sunday mentioned in the Bible?" Here it is.

Second, we see what they did when they gathered. One thing they did is they broke bread. This describes their observance of the Lord's Supper. And then, they listened to Paul preach. I want you to take note of something unusual about this gathering. They met in the evening, late at night. This was a convenient time because many of the early Christians were slaves and, because of their work requirements, they would not have been able to meet during the day.

So, picture the scene. It is late at night. The people gathered in Troas are eagerly listening to Paul share with them what the Lord has been doing. He has had an interesting life. They are hearing about all of his adventures and the things he has been doing in his ministry. It says in v 7 that "he prolonged his speech until midnight." Paul is long winded. I am being nice. He has a lot to say in a short amount of time.

Acts 20:9

This poor guy, Eutychus, is having a hard time keeping his eyes open. Has that ever happened to you in a service before? Fortunately, you were not sitting in a third story window, right?. He has had a long hard day! We

might never have heard about this young man had he stayed awake during the sermon. Instead, he falls asleep while sitting in an open window and plummets three stories to his death! It says that, after he fell, he “was taken up dead.” I interpret this to mean that Eutychus literally died. There is a lot of debate about this (surprisingly so), about what really happens here. I take it to mean that he died. It wasn’t just that he appeared to be dead. You have to remember who is writing this book; it is Doctor Luke. Don’t you think that a medical doctor would know whether somebody is dead or not? So, Eutychus died!

READ Acts 20:10-12

Now he is alive! So, what has happened? A miracle, right? What I find really fascinating about this story is that it seems to be completely downplayed by Luke to the degree that some people question whether Eutychus really died or not. What I want you to take away from this is that Paul brings someone back to life by the power of God working through him. Whether Luke wants to downplay it or not, it is a big deal!

READ Acts 20:13-16.

They are in Troas, where Eutychus fell asleep and died. Most scholars believe that Paul walks the 20 miles to the next port town of Assos while the ship sails around the peninsula to Assos. Paul then meets up with his ship a couple of days later. Why does Paul do this? Why does Paul opt to walk to Assos? Well, Luke never says. Maybe he is still concerned a little bit about Eutychus, making sure he is OK. So, he sends them on ahead and he will meet them later at Assos. He knows the ship will be held up there for a couple of days anyway to unload. For this trip Paul is by himself. That leads to another possibility – Paul probably felt like he needed to spend some alone time (with the Lord). We don’t know and Luke never says.

Paul meets up with them at Assos maybe a day or so later. He gets on the ship with them and then they head down the coast to the port city of Mitlyene and stop there. Then they sail on past the island of Chios, right on past Ephesus, around the island of Samos and then down to Miletus.

Originally, Paul planned to stop at Ephesus on his way home. This is a church he really loves. But he changes plans and Luke gives us the reason for this. Paul is in a hurry to make it to Jerusalem in time for the Feast of Pentecost. He knows that if he stops off in Ephesus that will delay him. But Paul knows they are going to be in Miletus for four or five days. So, he sends for the Ephesian leaders. He really wants to see them. Why does Paul not make the trip to Ephesus himself. One reason is that he does not want to risk missing his ship. Another reason is that the last time Paul left Ephesus it was not under very good terms with the city leaders, so he does not want to make a scene there. Instead, he sends for the Ephesian elders to come to him. That makes the most sense to me. It is about 40 miles from Miletus to Ephesus. That is no short trip, so it takes them a couple of days to get there. And then, assuming they respond immediately, it takes them a couple of days to get back – so, about four days.

READ Acts 20:17-18a

The implication here is that they come to Paul right away.

Do you realize that in the book of Acts this is the only recorded speech of Paul's to a Christian audience? All his other sermons and speeches are to mostly unbelievers. So, it is very significant. What you have here in this speech to the Ephesian leaders are qualities of a Christian servant. This is what Paul says...

READ Acts 20:18b-19

The first quality is HUMILITY. In Romans 12:3 Paul urges Christians "not to think more highly of [themselves] than [they] ought to think." Paul knows that he has to be a willing vessel and an open channel through whom the Lord's service can be accomplished. In order to do this, he has to basically get self out of the way and let God work. The first quality is humility. Second...

READ Acts 20:20-21

That was the Gospel message that Paul preached faithfully.

READ Acts 20:22-23

So, the second quality, which Paul clearly possesses, is DILIGENCE. He remains diligent in carrying out his calling from God, to spread the Gospel. Paul has been through a lot, hasn't he (so far in all of his missionary journeys)? We have seen that. And he knows that it will still be a rough road ahead of him. He doesn't know all the details, but He mentions here in v 23, imprisonment and afflictions.

This leads to the next quality, which is PERSONAL SACRIFICE. He says...

READ Acts 20:24-25

Ultimately Paul's calling to preach the Gospel will cost him his life, and that is OK with Paul. In addition, it means sacrificing his personal relationships. As much as Paul loves these Ephesian brothers, he realizes he probably will never see most of them again. I can't help but think of all those foreign missionaries who spend years on foreign soil far away from their own family and friends. That is a great personal sacrifice and it is not an easy thing to do. This is what Paul had done. These mission trips took years and he was willing to do it.

READ Acts 20:26-27

The fourth quality is that Paul is THOROUGH in his teaching. He revealed the whole truth about Christ and about salvation. He declared the entire will of God. He taught not only the "feel-good" truths (how God loves you, has a wonderful place prepared for you, and a plan for your life and hope of heaven, etc.), but he also taught the hard-hitting and difficult truths – those we don't like to hear. Those that convict us of our sin and shortcomings. God's truth is often difficult to hear, sometimes confrontational, but Paul never shied away from or apologized for teaching the whole truth of God. He was thorough.

Now, this next quality is 8 verses long.

READ Acts 20:28-31

“Three years” is a reference to his ministry in Ephesus. Paul wants to protect the flock from “fierce wolves,” those who seek to destroy the church by teaching false doctrines. This is still a problem today. Notice that he warns everybody “with tears.” He continues this same thought...

READ Acts 20:32-35

We can summarize all these eight verses in one word – CONCERN. Paul is concerned about them and their welfare; about these false teachers and about all the other things that are happening in their church. That is a pastor’s heart. What made Paul such an effective pastor was his heart, how he was concerned for people. It was not his great preaching. Oh, he was a good preacher, But, that is not what made him a good pastor. What made him a good pastor (and what makes any pastor a good pastor) is their concern for the flock. He truly cared about them. So, here you have several traits of a Christian servant from Paul’s message which ends here in v 35.

What happens after he talks to them? Well, Paul prays for them. The next quality is PRAYER. Paul prays for the Ephesian elders...

READ Acts 20:36

Notice that when Paul prays, he is kneeling. Kneeling when we pray is an outward sign of our inward reverence for God and submission of our spirit. So, Paul is praying.

The final quality of a Christian servant is demonstrated by the Ephesian elders themselves. This is one of the most moving scenes in the entire Bible.

READ Acts 20:37-38

Here Paul bids his final farewell to his dearest friends. Why are these grown men crying? Why the deep affection for Paul? Here in this passage, we see the most important quality of all in a Christian servant, one that Jesus often emphasized and that is LOVE. The Ephesian elders loved Paul and Paul loved them. LOVE is the quality that distinguishes the church at Ephesus from many of the other churches. The believers there loved the

Lord and each other. And it showed. Perhaps this is why this church was so special to Paul. When you read the book of Ephesians you get the sense that Paul really loved this church.

So, they all weep uncontrollably because they know they will probably never see each other again this side of heaven.

Luke, the writer of Acts, now describes his and Paul's long voyage home...

READ Acts 21:1-3

They always make these trips sound like they happen very fast. Well, this was probably a week-long or more trip. From Miletus (where they bid farewell to the Ephesian leaders) they head south to Cos, then to the island of Rhodes, and then to the port city of Patara; from there they cross the Mediterranean Sea, around the island of Cyprus, to the port city of Tyre.

READ Acts 21:4

The disciples there at Tyre say, "Hey Paul, don't go to Jerusalem. Don't go. It is going to be too dangerous!"

READ Acts 21:5-6

Here we see Paul kneeling in prayer with the believers at Tyre. Paul and his traveling companions enjoy warm fellowship with the Christians in Tyre. He knows a lot of them personally. They don't want Paul to go to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit has revealed to them that danger awaits Paul if he goes. You can certainly understand why they don't want him to go. They love Paul and don't want him to go there and be hurt. They are concerned for his safety. But Paul is determined to go to Jerusalem. Why? Because back in Acts Chapter 19 (a verse we read earlier) Paul's heart's desire is to go to Jerusalem and after that to Rome. The Lord has laid on his heart to do this. So, he feels led to do this. So, Paul sets his sight on Jerusalem despite the potential danger ahead.

READ Acts 21:7-8a

Paul and company land in Tyre, and then go to Ptolemais, and from there down to Caesarea. They will stay in Caesarea for a little while before the last leg of their journey, the 60 miles or so to Jerusalem. We will pick it up here in the middle of v 8 next time.

By the time Paul finishes mission trip number three, he will have been gone about 5 years. He will have traveled 1,937 miles by land, 1,370 miles by sea for a total of 3,307 miles. These are the totals for his third and final mission trip.

Now, if you add up all three of Paul's mission trips, he has been a missionary for nearly 10 years. He traveled a total of 4,449 miles by land, all on foot (no horses, no donkeys, no camels or carriages or taxis that we know about) – all on foot! Much of the terrain that he traveled on foot was difficult, mostly on dirt paths (they didn't have the kind of roads we have now), facing all kinds of hardships and dangers. Paul sailed a total of 3,270 miles by sea, primarily in small, rickety, and cramped cargo vessels, at the mercy of the wind and the weather. He wasn't on a cruise ship. But consider this: Paul traveled 7,719 perilous miles. He evangelized an area of 1,500 square miles. And he started nearly 20 churches. It is amazing what God can do with people who are completely yielded to Him! One man.

Well, let's get some application. We have to have application, don't we?

- Do not allow the setbacks in your life – those can come in a number of forms including disappointment, illness, depression, etc. (we all experience these from time to time) – to diminish your work for the Lord. God has you here for a reason! Stay the course. Paul had all kinds of issues, but he stayed the course, didn't he?
- Good Christian friends are a blessing from God. But sometimes we have to leave them behind to accomplish what God is leading

us to do. Again, I think of all those foreign missionaries and the sacrifices they make.

- Thinking about that tearful farewell on the beach at Miletus is a reminder of one of the sweet joys of heaven – that we will never again have to say goodbye to our friends.
- Do I possess the characteristics of a good disciple of Jesus? Am I diligent in all I do? Am I willing to make personal sacrifices for the kingdom? Am I thorough in my teaching and Bible study? Am I concerned about others? How is my prayer life? Do I truly love people? Am I the disciple that Jesus wants me to be?
- Do not allow well-meaning people to steer you away from doing what you know that God wants you to do.

Note: The statistics I used for the mileage of Paul's missionary journeys came from several on-line sources, most notably being:

www.biblecharts.org/apostlepaulcharts