

Acts 20:1-16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 November 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 20 verses 1 to 16. After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia.

When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia.

So Peter the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him, and of the Thessalonians Aristarchus and Secundus, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and the Asians Tychicus and Trophimus.

These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas. But we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days.

On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.

[1 : 0 2] There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered, and a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead.

But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him. And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed.

And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted. But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land.

And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mytilene, and sailing from there we came the following day opposite Chios. The next day we touched at Samos, and the day after that we went to Miletus.

After the riot in Ephesus, Paul now leaves for Macedonia at the beginning of chapter 20.

[2 : 1 8] He is now working his way back to Jerusalem, where his third missionary journey will be completed. Going through Macedonia, he goes through Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, before moving down towards Corinth.

He is retracing the steps of his second missionary journey. While he's doing this, he's encouraging and building up the churches along the way, bringing news from one place to another, bringing ministers from one place to another, and collecting gifts to bring back to Jerusalem.

Alongside this, he's also writing some letters. He most likely writes 2 Corinthians at the time in Macedonia. As we might see in 2 Corinthians 9, verses 1-3.

Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year, and your zeal has stirred up most of them.

But I am sending the brothers, so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. Paul on this journey is accompanied by several companions, including Luke himself, the wee returns at Philippi.

[3 : 2 6] These companions represent various churches in the various regions, many of whom seem to intend to return with Paul to Jerusalem. Why such a large company for a missionary journey that is seemingly completed?

It seems most likely that they are a delegation of many of the churches in various parts of the empire, bringing their respective gifts back to Jerusalem with Paul, representing their congregations in so doing.

This is a sort of harvest of the nations, which Paul is eager to bring to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of the Harvest. This would bring the narrative full circle, back to the initial gift of the Spirit at Pentecost in Jerusalem, at the beginning of the book.

Now there is a new gift being given at Pentecost. Now the Spirit is bringing in a much greater harvest, and perhaps Paul is intending to perform a sort of symbolic presentation of the harvest of the Gentile mission field with these men.

The fact that there are seven named persons might even relate to the seven lambs that are offered as part of the Pentecost sacrifices. They have been gathered together around the time of the Feast of Firstfruits, and they will be presented in Jerusalem at Pentecost with their gifts for the poor.

[4 : 36] This will be an expression of the unity of the church in Christ. Like Jesus his master, the Apostle Paul is also travelling towards Jerusalem and his capture there, surrounded by a company of disciples.

Paul will also write the epistle to the Romans shortly after this, as we can see from Romans chapter 15 verses 25 to 26. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. We can easily fall into the trap of reading Paul's letters as abstract theological treatises.

We can forget that they were delivered to particular bodies of people, in particular places, in particular times. This is really a critical juncture in Paul's ministry. He is trying to bring back this large group of Gentiles that will represent the harvest of the Gentiles, and he is writing to churches preparing them on the way.

He is also writing to prepare ahead of time for his fourth missionary journey, which he hopes will take him to Rome. We can easily read Paul's letters as books abstracted from time, as if Paul was writing about theology in a vacuum.

[5 : 45] But reading Paul's letters against the backdrop of the book of Acts, we can see that Paul was a traveller, he was a missionary, he was a man of action, and his letters are actions too.

His letters would often be designed to prepare the way for him in his mission, or perhaps on occasions as an alternative to a visit, where he lacked the time or the opportunity. This, of course, is especially the case for the prison letters.

In Troas, around the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, he gathers with the disciples there for a meeting on the first day of the week. He's trying to instruct them more deeply in the truth, and it seems that he talks for a very long period of time.

He talks for hours until midnight, and then beyond that, to the daybreak. It is of very great importance to him that he grounds them as firmly as he can in the truth during the time that he has. In some respects, we might see some Passover themes here. There's a sort of Last Supper in an upper room. There is death at midnight, just as the Angel of Death came at midnight upon Egypt.

[6 : 45] Paul is also preparing to leave for a long journey that will lead him up to the time of Pentecost. The reference to the Christians meeting on the first day of the week here raises the question of whether this had become more common practice by this time.

1 Corinthians 16, verse 2 also mentions the importance of the first day of the week. Whether or not this was just a pragmatic shift at this point, later on it would become clear that the movement from the last day of the week as the day of worship to the first day of the week was a significant theological movement.

The celebration of the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week commemorated the conclusion of the creation. It also commemorated the formation of the covenant at Sinai. A shift to worship on the first day of the week seems fitting when the event that's being recalled is a new creation, established on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, and also the establishment of a new covenant, established in Christ's resurrection too.

Paul speaks at length in a room where many are gathered together, and one of the young men, Eutychus, falls asleep. In this room where they're gathered there are many lamps. Many commentators suggest that the lamps might have something to do with Eutychus falling asleep. The lamps affect the air quality. But Eutychus is sitting in an open window, so he is probably not experiencing the worst of the air quality. And the fact that Paul is speaking on and on around midnight is likely reason enough to explain why he fell asleep.

[8 : 10] The emphasis upon the many lights does draw a distinction between a realm of great light and a realm of darkness. It's midnight and it's pitch black outside, whereas inside, where the

disciples are gathered, there is great light.

Lamps in the upper story of a house might also make us think of lights in the heavens, the third story of the created cosmos. Beyond this, we could think about the connection between lights and Pentecost.

At Pentecost, the disciples were lit like lamps, with tongues of flame descending upon their heads. Eutychus falls down from the window, and he's taken up dead.

This is the fourth of four stories in scripture that involve the raising of a dead body in an upper room. The other examples are found in the books of the kings, and then earlier on in the book of Acts. Elijah raises the son of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings chapter 17. Elisha raises the son of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings chapter 4. And Peter raises Dorcas in Acts chapter 9, verses 36 to 42.

[9 : 11] In each of these cases, it is associated with an upper room. Paul's bending over Eutychus as part of the means by which he is raised up might remind us of the way that Elijah and Elisha lie upon the bodies of the children that they raise up.

The contrast between light in the room and darkness outside, death outside, and the raising to life inside, might help us to see some symbolic import in the story.

Feeling keenly the death and the darkness that surrounds them, it would be comforting and encouraging to the church at Troas to know that God is more powerful than all of the death and the darkness that might assail them.

This section concludes with a lengthy itinerary of their journey back, past Ephesus. The detailed character of this itinerary is perhaps understandable because Luke is with them. This is a first-person account that he is giving at this point.

Beyond that fact, however, the itinerary might remind us of certain stories that we find in the Old Testament, as Abraham goes throughout the land, or maybe as the people conquer the land going from one place to another.

[10 : 13] The story of Paul's missionary journeys is in many ways achieving something similar. A question to consider. This passage ends with an expression of Paul's intention to get back to Jerusalem before the day of Pentecost.

It's important to him to be there at that point, and as we have seen, there may be some symbolic connection between what he's doing in bringing the gift from the Gentiles and the Gentiles themselves at the time of the Feast of Harvest.

Nevertheless, the reference to a Jewish feast and Paul's eagerness to get back in time to celebrate it might surprise some hearers. Yet this is by no means the only occasion where we see something like this.

Where else in the book of Acts can we see references to Jewish feasts and what significance is given to them at these different junctures?