Chapter 51: Turmoil and Tragedy

Acts 20:1–12

Paul's journey to Jerusalem will involve no small amount of heartbreak. After conflict in Ephesus, he goes through a pastorally stretching part of his journey on the way to Troas. Luke does not tell us much about the conflict in which Paul was embroiled, but Paul himself tells us much more about this season of his life in his letters to the Corinthians. Beyond that conflict, Paul encounters deep tragedy and sorrow in Troas as a young man falls to his death while Paul is preaching. Although Eutychus does rise from the dead, even Jesus wept before he raised Lazarus (John 11:35). How do we get through seasons of pain like this? *In turmoil and tragedy, rely on God who raises the dead.*

Turmoil (Acts 20:1–6)

As Paul moves on from the "uproar" of Ephesus, we should remember the "uproar" that was happening elsewhere in his ministry. Polhill observes that 1 Corinthians was written toward the end of Paul's time in Ephesus.[1] Paul had stated in 1 Corinthians 16:8 that he would "stay in Ephesus until Pentecost," and in Acts 20:16 we read that "Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost." Then, in 2 Cor. 1:8, he informs the Corinthian church of the "affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself" (2 Cor. 1:8), and he speaks of his travel to Troas (Acts 20:5) in 2 Cor. 2:12–13: "When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia." Why was Paul so anxious about talking with Titus? Paul explains that he was finally "comforted…by the coming of Titus" because through Titus he was ultimately "comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more" (2 Cor. 7:6–7).

As Polhill consolidates these narratives, he writes, "Paul seems to have written a rather confrontive letter to that congregation during that period. He described the letter as 'painful' and written 'with many tears' (2 Cor 2:3f.). Strong opposition to Paul had arisen in the church, and there were attacks on his status as their apostle….The letter was sent by way of Titus, and Paul evidently wanted to hear Titus's report back to him about 'how it went' before proceeding himself to Corinth."[2] This "confrontive letter" was not 1 Corinthians, but is apparently an additional letter that was sent between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians that we do not still have.[3] In the background to Acts 20:1–6, then, is all the conflict between him and the Corinthian church. At least some of this is behind Paul's statements in 2 Corinthians 11:28 that "there is daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches." Beyond the conflict in Corinth, part of the pressure and anxiety seems to surround his departure from these areas. As Paul sends for the disciples to say farewell and depart, he knows

[1] Polhill, *Acts*, 414–15.

[2] Polhill, *Acts*, 414–15.

[3] David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC 29 (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1999), 26–30

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that he will not be back. He will call for the Ephesian elders to address them another time (Acts 20:17–38), but he will not return to minister to the church he had served for more than two years (Acts 19:10). How much of Christian ministry takes place in the midst of conflict and sorrow! Polhill notes the emphasis of this section, as Paul begins his journey to Jerusalem and then to Rome: "Paul's journey to Jerusalem was as foreboding as that of his master before him, how it ended in chains, but how even in the seeming defeat of his arrest in Jerusalem God turned the events to the triumph of the gospel, leading Paul to the capital of the empire, the end of the earth, to bear his witness openly and unhinderedly."[4]

In v. 3, we read about another part of the conflict with which Paul was embroiled. Here, it is not conflict within the churches, but a violent plot made against his life by the Jews in that region. After learning about this, he "decided to return through Macedonia" (v. 3). As he goes, Paul is accompanied by representatives from the churches where Paul has served: Sopater from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia (e.g., Ephesus; cf. Acts 19:10, 26). It seems that they are accompanying Paul to carry donations for relief to Jerusalem, as reflected in 1 Corinthians 16:3–4: "And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me."[5] It is hard to know what to make of the fact that representatives from Corinth are not included in this journey, but Bruce is probably right that Titus served this role, on the basis of 2 Corinthians 8:6: "Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace."[6] In spite of the conflict and sorrow, the mission continues.

In the last two verses of this section, Luke subtly drops himself back into the narrative ("we"; v. 6), as he had back in Acts 16:10–17. Lenski writes that Luke "had apparently been left in Philippi in 16:40 and now appears in this city and joins Paul's company. All we are able to determine is that he had spent the entire interval of about five years in Philippi, working in the congregation and at his profession as a physician" (see Col. 4:14).[7]

Tragedy (Acts 20:7–12)

The next section is notable for two reasons. First, Luke provides us a rare glimpse into an ordinary worship service in the early church. Second, Luke narrates an extraordinary miracle, in which a young man is raised from the dead. Starting with the ordinary worship service, we have here "the earliest unambiguous example we have for the Christian practice of gathering together for worship on" the first day of the week.[8] The language is more interesting than the English translation suggests: Ἐν δὲ τῇ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων (*En de tē mia tōn sabbatōn*), or, literally, "now on the first of the sabbaths" (v. 7a).[9] Lenski explains the literal sense as "on the first

[4] Polhill, *Acts*, 417–18.

[5] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 820.

[6] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 405–06.

[7] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 823.

[8] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 407–08.

[9] There is some debate about whether Luke is describing a meeting on what we would call Saturday evening (the Jews counted days from sundown of one day to the next) or Sunday evening (the Romans counted days from midnight to midnight, as we do). I am inclined to read this as the Roman timeline, following Polhill and in line with our own practices. (Polhill, *Acts*, 418.)

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(day) with reference to the Sabbath. The Jews had no definite names for the days of the week and hence designated them with reference to their Sabbath."[10]

Even so, we should see that this phrase "the first of the sabbaths" is used in every Gospel account of Jesus' resurrection (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). Most interesting is Matthew's description: "Now after the Sabbath [σαββάτων; *sabbatōn*], toward the dawn of the first day of the week [εἰς μίαν σαββάτων; *eis mian sabbatōn*]…" (Matt. 28:1). In this, Matthew subtly draws a contrast to the old Sabbath ("*after* the sabbath") and the new Sabbath ("into the first of the Sabbaths"). Although some have argued that the Sabbath no longer exists in the New Testament, this is not true. Jesus claims that he is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8; Luke 6:5), the day of his resurrection is called "the first of the Sabbaths," and the author of Hebrews tells believers that "there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9). Further, here in Acts 20:7, we see an ordinary worship service of the Christian church "on the first of the Sabbaths." Truly, the Lord's Day is the "Christian Sabbath."[11]

Next, Luke tells us that "we" (he is still involved in the narrative) "were gathered together to break bread" (v. 7b). By this, Luke indicates that the church was gathered for a worship service that included a celebration of the Lord's Supper.[12] Finally, Luke tells us that "Paul talked with them" (v. 7c) and, later, that he "conversed" with them (v. 11). The latter word for "converse" (ὁμιλησας; *homilēsas*) is the word from which we get our word for "homiletics," related to the art of preaching. Even so, what Paul is doing here doesn't sound like he has a prepared sermon, but that he is pouring out his heart through opening the Word of God with these people before departing from them. Thus, Paul "prolonged his speech until midnight" (v. 7d).

Luke's statement that there were many lamps in that place (v. 8) not only underscores the darkness of the room, but also suggests that it may have been warm as the lamps blazed and possibly also provides an explanation for why Eutychus sat by a window: to find some fresh air.[13] In that position, late into the night, "as Paul talked still longer," Eutychus fell into a deep sleep and then fell down to the ground outside, being "taken up dead" (v. 9). Lest we think that Eutychus simply revived naturally, Lenski rightly insists, "Luke says 'dead' and not 'as dead'" and reminds us that Luke, who was present at the time, was a physician who would know the difference between dead and unconscious.[14]

As many commentators observe, Paul's response to the dead young man is quite similar to the actions of Elijah and Elisha, who similarly raised boys from the dead by stretching over them (vv.

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[10] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 824.

[11] "As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath." (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.7)

[12] Calvin notes also that the verb in v. 11 is "taste" rather than "eat," as our translations have it. By "taste," the text seems not to indicate an ordinary meal but the Lord's Supper. (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:235–36.)

[13] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 408.

[14] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 828.

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10–12; 1 Kgs. 17:17–24; 2 Kgs. 4:18–37).[15] In raising this boy from the dead, the Lord performed a miraculous sign to confirm the preaching of Paul as he proclaimed Christ to these saints.[16] Then, after raising the boy and having broken bread and eaten, Paul continued conversing all the way until dawn, at which time he departed (v. 11). Although Paul had departed from them, the church was "not a little comforted" (v. 12) by the life of the young man. Although our own worship services do not ordinarily include resurrections, we too should be comforted week by week as we hear the Scriptures opened to proclaim Christ, just as Paul did during this time.

Discussion Questions

1. What was the "uproar" (v. 1)? What do we learn about the conflict that Paul endures from vv. 1–6? What do we learn about the conflict that Paul endures from 1 and 2 Corinthians? How much did that conflict weigh on Paul? Why do you think that Luke never mentions it? How do we see Paul continue forward in ministry in spite of the incredible turmoil that he was facing in his anxiety for the churches? What does he tell us in 2 Corinthians 1:9?

2. What is important about how Luke sets the scene in v. 7? What is the literal translation of "the first day of the week"? What does Luke indicate when he says that the church "gathered together to break bread"? What kind of "talk" is Paul giving with the people in Troas? What do we see from this scene about the structure that our own worship services should take? What is different about this particular service?

3. What factors contribute to Eutychus's drowsiness (v. 7)? Why was he near the window (v. 8)? What happened to him when he fell from the window (v. 9)? Whom does Paul resemble when he bends over Eutychus and Eutychus comes back from the dead (v. 10)? What effect do you think this tragedy had on the people? What did this miracle do to comfort the congregation (v. 12)? What can we learn from this miracle?

4. Where do you experience turmoil within your family, among your neighbors, or with your coworkers or fellow students? Where do you experience tragedy in the normal sorrows of life in your own life or the lives of those whom you love? How does Paul's resilience and endurance through suffering in ministry teach us about pressing forward in the midst of suffering? How do these stories strengthen our faith in the God who protects and provides for us?

[15] e.g., Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:237–38; Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 829; Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 408; Polhill, *Acts*, 419; Bock, *Acts*, 620.

[16] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:237.

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