

LESSONS OF THE FALL

ACTS 20:2-15 NOVEMBER 4, 2020

I love watching those super slow speed replays of athletic motion that they can capture these days. Whether it's swimmers taking off from the block in an Olympic race or a keeper diving and twisting to save a shot on goal. One of the best is the baseball swing. It's a thing of beauty. "Hitting a ball with a round bat is considered one of the most difficult skills in sport."¹ From stance to contact to follow through there's an incredible amount of motion as muscle groups from the feet and legs up through the abdominals into the shoulders, arm and neck all do their part, some turning one way, some turning another, all together an amazing, graceful movement.

Everybody's stance and swing is just a little bit different, but *each* member of the team is on the same side, part of the same effort, and gets a chance to contribute toward the common victory.

In our passage tonight we see a lot of motion as Paul and his gang of eight move through various cities on their way toward Jerusalem. As they go, we're able to see the beautiful, grace-filled motion of Christian ministry, with many different things happening, but happening harmoniously and effectively. Looking at these verses, we can highlight some principles and characteristics of doing God's work in a way that glorifies Him, strengthens others and keeps us in spiritual scoring position.

As we begin, Paul is headed out of Ephesus. In verse 2 we read:

Acts 20:2-3a - ²And when he had passed through those areas [of Macedonia] and offered them many words of encouragement, he came to Greece ³and stayed three months.

Throughout this whole section a general characteristic of Christian ministry is that it is full of *activity*. That isn't to suggest that Christians should be busy for busy's sake. As we've seen many times, there are *specific* things God the Holy Spirit wants to lead you in and to simply do other things just to do them is actually detrimental to your spiritual development. But, there's no denying that for *all* the disciples in this book, the Christian life is a life of active service. Some stay local, some travel out. Some speak, others sew, but everyone is engaged.

We also see here (and later in verse 12), that Christian activity is characterized by *encouragement*. Now, encouragement isn't just flattery or blind optimism. In the Bible it means to help, exhort and comfort.² Paul here was going around speaking urgently to these young churches, some of whom would go through very difficult times, but, though the message was urgent, it wasn't meant to weigh them down with a burden. Christian ministry is *encouraging* because its aim is always to build *up*. Even when Paul had to go deal with serious issues in, say, Corinth, his goal wasn't to tear down what had been built there, but to *strengthen* them in the truth and in the Spirit.

Our messaging, our 'many words,' should be the same. What are my words *building*? If I have to give a correction to a fellow believer, am I doing so with the intention of *building* them back up, or am I just hurling words at them, wanting them to feel stung like a brick through a window? When I speak to non-believers, what's my goal? In Acts we see that the Christian goal was that they would believe and be saved. The words flowed on a river of compassion and grace, not anger and venom.

¹ https://www.worldresearchlibrary.org/up_proc/pdf/215-145924689538-42.pdf

² *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament*

Now, before we move on, Paul was giving many words of encouragement to these believers, but with a backdrop of unrest and the potential for very real persecution. These were people who acknowledged that, in some cases, they may be attacked, imprisoned or killed for coming to church. And we can be sure that Paul did *not* say, “Nah, none of that is going to happen!” In fact, he probably said the *opposite*. And yet, they were comforted and built up.

Our words of encouragement (at this point) usually are less about persecution and more about suffering. The people you know are struggling with sickness or loss or fear. Our words of encouragement shouldn't be platitudes that “everything is going to work out.” Or that God is going to heal every affliction they have in *this* life. In the end, all will be made well, all suffering will be dealt with, but in *this* life, lots of Christians are going to suffer and die and our encouragement, our *support* for them needs to be true and honest, otherwise it is no support at all.

Acts 20:3b - The Jews plotted against him when he was about to set sail for Syria, and so he decided to go back through Macedonia.

Flexibility is a characteristic of Christian ministry. We can't always predict what is going to happen and what obstacles we might face. Rather than walk off the field, we just need to adjust our swing. When a pitcher throughs a curveball, the batter doesn't throw up his hands and say, “I thought you were just gonna throw them nice and slow right down the middle!” That's not how it works.

It seems that Paul had booked his passage and that, perhaps, these guys were planning to take the voyage *with* him and maybe toss him over the side once they were out in the open sea. We don't know for sure, but at the last minute the plan had to change.

The Jews' plot backfired, because instead of making a beeline for Syria, Paul decides to *extend* his trip and goes back to do *more* ministry through Macedonia.

Acts 20:4 - ⁴He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia.

We'll see in the next verse that Dr. Luke joins the group once again as well. So you have a team of 9 guys on their quest to Jerusalem. The fellows in this list were probably selected by their churches to be a part of the delegation that was bringing relief money from the Gentiles to the church in Jerusalem. That was the major purpose of their trip together. And it highlights for us that a characteristic of Christian ministry is *generosity*. The Gentile Christians in Corinth, on the *human* level, had nothing to do with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. But, as far as they were concerned, they were *family*. If Jews were suffering and Gentiles could send relief, of course they'd supply what they could.

In the Bible we are commanded to make generosity a priority. We're told that our financial giving to the work of God should be regular, sacrificial and joyful. We should support local ministry and allow the Spirit to lead us in how we can support wider ministry of evangelism and compassion. What you give should be motivated by love, but it *should* be happening. It's not a question of 'if' but of 'which.'

Now, these guys listed here show us a few things about Christian ministry. First, the fact that they exist and are here participating in the work reminds us that the goal of local church ministry isn't just to generate some *program*. The goal is to harvest *people*. To save them out of the clutches of sin

and then to help them become fruitful members of Christ's Body. Paul didn't go to these cities and say, "Ok, we need to establish a program that will generate money to feed hungry people in Judea." He preached the Gospel, then, when people got saved, he established local churches and then those people *lived out* the Christian life, which *included* activity like generosity and compassion and all that. Churches can become project or program oriented and the expense of actual people and that's not what we want. People in the church aren't cogs, they're children of God.

We also note that these guys had different levels of experience, different areas of expertise. But they were all useful in God's hands. The Lord could bring them together to work harmoniously, taking curve after curve together.

Acts 20:5-6 - ⁵These men went on ahead and waited for us in Troas, ⁶but we sailed away from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread. In five days we reached them at Troas, where we spent seven days.

Again, we would note their flexibility. Sometimes in the Christian life we find ourselves waiting, sometimes we're moving. Sometimes we get to be reunited with friends in ministry, sometimes we're doing stuff with strangers. But this group of guys were a well-oiled machine, because they were filled with the Spirit and shared a common heart of grace.

Acts 20:7 - ⁷On the first day of the week, we assembled to break bread. Paul spoke to them, and since he was about to depart the next day, he kept on talking until midnight.

A characteristic of the Christian life we might draw out here is the *camaraderie* of believers. We use the word 'fellowship' a lot, but that's a somewhat old fashioned term. To be 'in fellowship' with other Christians means to share together with them. Sharing one another's sufferings and one another's blessings. It means we *partner* together in faith. It is meant to be a living, family bond.³ And that means we embrace one another, warts and all, in love and friendship, with Christ as our focus.

When it says Paul kept on talking until midnight we shouldn't assume he was just monologuing for 6 hours. Rather, scholars point out that the term used means he discoursed with them.⁴ Undoubtedly he had a lot to say, but they also had a lot to ask. During this section of Acts it's believed that Paul wrote 2nd Corinthians, Romans, maybe Galatians as well.⁵ So clearly he had a lot of doctrine on his mind. But these were young Christians who would've had a ton of questions. And, Paul was probably assuming he'd never see these people again. That's what he's going to tell the Ephesians in the next passage, so it's probably his thinking here as well.

Acts 20:8 - ⁸There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were assembled,

This large, upper room, was probably filled with smoke. These people had probably worked a *full* shift all day long. That is going to give some context to what's coming next. But, before moving on, we should highlight the fact that *integrity* is a characteristic of Christian ministry. We see it also in how they're handling the funds being collected. There was nothing shady going on. They conducted themselves on the up and up. Now, the Christians of that time were sometimes accused of very

³ TDNT

⁴ Cambridge Bible For Schools And Colleges

⁵ William MacDonald *The Acts: Dynamic Christianity*

strange things. It was suggested they may be cannibals. Some accused them of having weird, secret meetings in the dark where they butcher babies and commit acts of incest.⁶

Obviously none of that was true, but I appreciate that the Christians here behaved like Daniel. Lights on, windows open, gathering together openly. That doesn't mean Christians are never driven underground, when possible, they were public with their activity. "You say we're eating human flesh, well let us *show* you what the Lord's supper actually is." It's a sad thing when you hear in the news about underhanded, questionable practices are happening with God's money or in a ministry. That shouldn't be true of God's people.

Acts 20:9 - ⁹ and a young man named Eutychus was sitting on a window sill and sank into a deep sleep as Paul kept on talking. When he was overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was picked up dead.

Some commentators say that the devil *pushed* him out the window to *distract* Paul! Others rail on poor Eutychus for not being spiritual enough to stay awake. Listen - he probably had worked from dawn till dusk. Now was on hour 6 of a church meeting. The room is stuffy and hot and filled with oil smoke. He's just trying to get a breath of air...he probably gave his real seat up to someone else. And he just finally tanks out. I know I've felt this way before. There have been times where we've been overseas and we're just wiped from travel and everything and we're in some church meeting and I'm about to nod off and I'm thinking, "Man, is it going to look bad if I fall asleep right now." So, let's not criticize this poor guy.

We *can* learn something from this example, though: Accidents happen. In this case, everything is going to work out great right away - Eutychus is going to be raised from the dead - but sometimes, *lots* of times, that's now how it works. God's people get hurt. God's people die. Not because God pushed them out the window or even the devil did, but because we live in a *fallen* world. Here at Calvary, we're not Calvinistic when it comes to salvation. But if you stop and think about it, a *lot* of Christians sort of become Calvinists when it comes to things that happen in life. Listen: sometimes calamities just happen. Not so God can work a miracle and not because people were so worthy of judgment, but because the world has been infected with death. John the Baptist wasn't beheaded in order that God might do some glorious miracle. And when a tower collapsed on some people in Siloam in Luke 13 they didn't die because they were worse sinners than other people. The world has been ruined. And God *is* working a large-scale, cosmic plan to redeem. In the meantime, sometimes people fall out of windows. Let's be careful not to blame God for that.

Acts 20:10 - ¹⁰ But Paul went down, bent over him, embraced him, and said, "Don't be alarmed, because he's alive."

Some try to suggest that Eutychus wasn't *actually* dead, but he was. A medical doctor pronounced him dead. What we're seeing here is a miracle. But it also serves as a type in a few ways.

First of all, this is a type of what God has done for you.⁷ But it is also a type of what we can do for one another. Paul, maybe on this very trip, wrote this to the Galatians:

⁶ <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/octavius.html>

⁷ Gene Pensiero *In The Sill Of The Night*

Galatians 6:1 - if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.

Eutychus had been overcome by sleep and, as a result, fell. Paul, his loving brother, gently and compassionately took him up in his arms and brought him back into fellowship with the others.

This is a characteristic of Christian ministry: We're to *intervene* in these situations and do what we can to restore the fallen back into the Body.

Acts 20:11-12 - ¹¹After going upstairs, breaking the bread, and eating, Paul talked a long time until dawn. Then he left. ¹²They brought the boy home alive and were greatly comforted.

We might note here that there is a *practicality* in the Christian life. There was food that needed to be prepared, lamps that needed to be filled with oil, chairs to set out. It wasn't just all emotionalism or individualism. And, I do love that after this shocking event - the death of a young man - Paul treats it simply as an intermission. He goes back and starts teaching again. Sometimes, if we're not careful, we start to become superstitious about things. God *does* lead in subtle ways sometimes, but this accident with Eutychus wasn't a 'sign' that Paul should stop. I was driving somewhere the other day and just as I got on the freeway a cardboard box full of something in the truck in front of me sailed out of his bed and *bam* right into me. That's a drag, but it wasn't a *sign* that I should turn back home.

The passage closes with a trip itinerary.

Acts 20:13-15 - ¹³We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul on board, because these were his instructions, since he himself was going by land. ¹⁴When he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went on to Mitylene. ¹⁵Sailing from there, the next day we arrived off Chios. The following day we crossed over to Samos, and the day after, we came to Miletus.

One characteristic that we might pull out here is that the Christian life is one of *endurance*. Whether you were the guys on the boat or Paul walking 20 miles to the next town, it was an effort. Inning after inning, the pitches kept coming. Sometimes straight down the middle, sometimes crazy curveballs high and inside. But we see the Christians in motion, full of grace, sometimes being brushed back, sometimes hitting a home run, but consistently accomplishing great things with the Lord.

And that's one of the great things about this book. It shows that no Christian is meant to be a lifeless drone in some rigid operation. Paul, on this leg of his trip, would write Romans and explain that we are all various parts of One Body, with various abilities and tasks. Using the baseball analogy, you might be at bat or you might be on deck. But everyone is part of the action. And though we can't predict each pitch we're going to get thrown at us (we may even get beamed by one or two), we can continue what was started in Acts. As we, too, engage in the Christian life and take our swings. We can be taught and be teaching. We can be generous and practical. We can be active and flexible. We can live with endurance and camaraderie with our teammates. These are the motions of the Christian life. We are the ones at bat. God has called us out onto the field. And that is an exciting thought.