

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL IN THE UNPREDICTABLE EVENTS OF LIFE

Acts 20:1-16

INTRODUCTION

Does coming to church on a Sunday morning ever feel completely irrelevant to your life? Does it ever feel to you that the things that go on at church are out of touch with what's going in your life? When you hear pastors and elders and bible study leaders talk about "spiritual" things does it all seem just plain boring and unrelated to real life? Especially when you've experienced some great loss or tragedy like losing your job or finding out you've got cancer or discovering your child's been lying to you and you sit here in the middle of all these smiling, apparently well-adjusted people, doesn't all this religious mumbo-jumbo about sin and forgiveness and heaven and hell feel trite and hopelessly out of touch with real life?

Pastors and elders and other leaders in the church know that lots of people feel this way about the church. Many concerned people through the years have proposed a variety of solutions to the perceived irrelevance of the church. However, I would argue that the church and its message are not irrelevant to the human condition. Rather, I would argue, because this is the argument of the Bible, that the church which remains faithful to the biblical pattern is the most relevant institution on the face of the planet and those churches that try to adjust themselves to the felt needs expressed by the surrounding culture find themselves becoming irrelevant.

I would argue that our passage today sets forth this fact. The church which is helpful to people living in the midst of such unpredictable events as is common to life is the church which maintains its commitment to a few biblical patterns, not the church which aims to be relevant. This passage, at first glance, appears to be simply a travelogue, a journal of Paul's travels around the Aegean Sea. Paul leaves Ephesus after a city wide riot; goes to Macedonia and then on to Greece. After spending three months there he goes by land back to Macedonia and then by ship to Troas. In Troas a tragedy is turned into a glorious expression of God's love and power while Paul preaches through the night. Then we have a detailed description of about a 10 day journey down the coast of the Roman province of Asia, which is modern Turkey, ending with Paul staying a few days in the port city of Miletus. I aim to demonstrate that this text is not simply some irrelevant account of travel in the ancient world but rather a description of how God gives stability and life to his people who live in the midst of life's unpredictable events.

MAIN POINT

God gives stability and life to his people in the unpredictable events of life through...

I. The prayerful, Spirit-led planning of called leaders for the sake of the church (19:21-22, 20:1-3, 16)

The period of time from the riot in Ephesus recorded at the end of chapter 19 until Paul and his companions arrive at Miletus in 20:16 is about 2 years. Verses 1-2 summarize at least one and half years. We know more about these two years in Paul's life than almost any other two year period because he wrote about these events in his two letters to the church in Corinth and in the 15th chapter of his letter to the Romans. I want to fill in some of those details from his letters so that we can see how intentional Paul's actions were.

Luke, in Acts does not give us many details of Paul's plans or motives. He simply records Paul's movements and activities. We know these are not random wanderings because of 19:21-22 which tells us that the HS led Paul to plan to leave Ephesus and go to Macedonia and Achaia and then on to Jerusalem and from there to Rome. Then in v.16 Luke tells us that Paul decided to sail past Ephesus because he was planning on making it to Jerusalem by the feast of Pentecost. But it is in Paul's own letters we find out what his plans are and why he made the plans he made. What we know is that while Paul was in Ephesus a delegation of Christians from the church in Corinth, led by a guy named Chloe, came to Paul and told him that there was big trouble in that

church. A group of false teachers had arrived in Corinth and were changing the gospel Paul preached and the church was disintegrating into factions and the people were abandoning the true doctrine of Jesus and the godly living that comes from true doctrine. So Paul wrote, from Ephesus, his first letter to the Corinthians to be delivered to the church there by Titus and Timothy. At the same time Paul became aware of the fact that the church in Jerusalem was suffering significant financial poverty among the people. So he began, while in Ephesus to take a collection from the Gentile churches to be brought to the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Finally, as he felt that his work in this part of the world was coming to an end he planned to visit Rome on the way to Spain so he could preach the gospel and establish the church in a region where the gospel had not yet been preached.

So, following the riot in Ephesus he traveled northwest to the port city of Troas. This was a place he had been in before but where he had not preached the gospel. He says in 2 Corinthians that God opened a wide door for him in Troas to preach the gospel. However, he was so concerned about what was happening in Corinth and had expected to find Titus there to get a report that, not finding Titus, he did not take advantage of the open door but traveled to Macedonia, most likely to Philippi in search of Titus. There he finally found Titus and he told Paul that there was still trouble in Corinth. So Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians and sent it to Corinth in the hands of Titus. Then he spent the next year and a half preaching the gospel north and west of Philippi into the northern Roman province of Illyricum, which is modern Albania. He also continues his work of collecting money from the Gentile churches to take to Jerusalem. He finally goes down to Corinth where he stays three months (v.3). Presumably through his letters and the work of Titus and Timothy his time there is well spent teaching and encouraging the church. During those three months he writes his letter to the Romans in which he thoroughly explains the gospel and prepares the Roman church for his visit to them after he goes to Jerusalem.

Paul then begins his trip to Jerusalem to deliver the large cash gift he has collected to the poor Christians in that church. He plans to go to Jerusalem through his home church in Antioch, which is in Syria (v.3). He takes with him a delegation of Gentile believers from each of the churches to oversee the delivery of this substantial gift (v.4). Just as they are about to embark on their trip they find out that a group of Jewish people have hatched a plan to kill Paul while on the ship he was going to take to Jerusalem. So their plans are changed and they go by land back to Philippi. While Paul remains in Philippi the seven men who were traveling with him went across the top of the Aegean Sea to Troas. Then Paul, now accompanied by Luke (note the "we" in v. 6) boards a ship and takes a five day trip across the sea to Troas. After spending a week there they take a 10 day journey down the coast, stopping in 4 ports before finally arriving in Miletus (vv.13-16). Again, notice that Paul has a plan to get to Jerusalem before the feast of Pentecost which is 49 days after the Passover (v.16). What is very interesting to see here is that because of the plot of the Jews Paul and company altered their plans. Paul would never have preached the gospel in Troas and the death and resurrection of Eutychus would have never happened if not for that plot. It is important to note that while Paul makes plans, yet he is submissive to God's direction in and through the circumstances of life.

You cannot miss the fact that these are not the random wanderings of gypsy like people but in all that Paul is doing he has a plan that he is pursuing. And, particularly as we listen to his description of what he is doing in his letters we can see that all this planning is for the benefit of the churches. Whether it is preaching the gospel in new areas to establish the church or writing letters to rebuke a church or to teach a church or sending his emissaries to give leadership to a troubled church or taking a collection for the poor in the church in Jerusalem, or preaching through the night at the church in Troas, Paul, as one called by God to lead the church is making plans for the benefit of the church. He is actively thinking and planning and plotting his next moves with a view to helping the church that belongs to Jesus to the best of his ability.

Just as Paul had clear plans and goals towards which he was working for the good of the church so the leaders of local churches must also plan for the good of the church. Also, just as Paul adjusted his plans according to the God ordained circumstances of life, so local church leaders must be willing to adjust their plans according to the God ordained circumstances of our lives. God wants us to think and plan for the future so that the church

continues to grow up into the “fullness of Christ.” It is God’s intention that through the plans of the leadership of local churches that each person in the church enjoys the life of Christ in greater ways and the stability that his life gives in the midst of this troubled life.

I want to mention five areas in which we elders and other leaders in our church are seeking to make plans so that our church continues to grow as God wants us to grow. First of all, we continue to work with Pastor Steve and all the small group leaders to insure that we are equipping and supporting a growing number of growing spiritual leaders so that every person in this church has an opportunity to be involved in a quality small group. It is our plan and our prayer that as we meet each other face to face in small groups we will grow in our knowledge of Christ and in our love for each other. Second, we are working with the Next Generation Discipleship Team to develop a survey to find out how we are doing at equipping and supporting our parents in the work of teaching the gospel to their children. We aim to use what we discover to make plans that will do a better job of supporting our parents so that our children “grow up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Third, as some of you may know Derek Perdue, who is pursuing his Masters of Divinity degree through Bethel Seminary is serving this year as an intern. His special focus will be to help us develop plans for doing a better job at evangelism in our community. We believe there are yet more lost sheep in this community that God wants to use us to bring into Christ’s flock. Fourth, we are in the beginning stages of making plans to start new churches in Rock County who will share our commitment to preaching a God-centered gospel. Fifth, we are in the beginning stages of making plans to develop funds to pay down or pay off our mortgage and to finish our building so that we have the resources we need to teach and preach the gospel in our community for years to come. We want you to know that in all of our planning our ambition is to promote the welfare of God’s people who are already in our church and who are yet to be added to our church. We desperately desire from you your prayers for and your involvement in both the making of these plans and the implementation of them.

II. The single minded commitment of leaders to the gospel for the church (vv.1-6, 13-16)

When Paul plans and works for the good of the church, for the benefit of God’s people, he is chiefly working to make sure that the gospel of Jesus is being accurately and fervently taught in and by the churches that he has founded. It is not only that he personally gives the bulk of his energies to preaching the gospel but it is also the chief thing he is concerned for in the churches which he has established. The stability and life of God’s people in troubled times is determined entirely by the knowledge we possess of this glorious gospel and our personal reliance upon it. You cannot trust what you do not know. Knowledge of the gospel always precedes faith in the gospel and thus a life lived in accordance with it. Churches that spend their time trying to motivate people to live right or to serve their community apart from clearly teaching and explaining the detailed doctrines of the gospel will fail at enabling people to live right and help others. It is only those churches in which the leadership has a razor like focus upon the gospel and the communication of that gospel that will be and become all that God wants and in which the people of God will find the relevant help that they need.

Luke clearly shows us that this is Paul’s primary concern. He gathers the church in Ephesus before he leaves to encourage them. He spends a year and a half in Macedonia and regions beyond and brings them much encouragement. He preaches to the church in Troas for a whole night. He writes letters to churches to make sure they remain faithful to the true gospel and live worthy of that gospel. I could literally read for you hundreds of statements from Paul’s letters that show that he believed that the main thing the people of God need is a clear declaration of and instruction in the details of the gospel of Jesus. I’m just going to quote two for you. In Acts 20:24 Paul says, “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” Paul is ready to die in order to fulfill the work Jesus gave him to do which is to teach, to bear witness to the gospel of God’s grace. This message of God’s surprising willingness to pardon and count righteous undeserving sinners who simply trust in Jesus is what the church needs. Then in his letter to Timothy who was serving as a pastor in Ephesus he writes, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in

Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” All the sufferings of Paul are for the sake of Jesus’ elect people, that is, for the church. That benefit he works to give is their eternal salvation. But notice, the sufferings he endures come to him because of his commitment to preach the gospel, to teach the doctrines of Jesus. So Paul’s whole life is devoted to this one thing: to preach the good news of Jesus so that all God’s elect make it safely into the glory of heaven.

There is no more relevant thing that a church can do than to commit itself to the faithful teaching of this glorious message about Jesus as it is set forth in the pages of this book. This message alone can give stability and life to dead and wavering sinners. So I beg you to not treat this message with indifference or contempt. I urge you to make it your business to learn this gospel, to pay attention on Sundays and to make it the subject of conversation in your homes. There is only one way to stand when the end of all things comes upon you and that is if you are standing in and on the promises God has made to believing sinners in Jesus.

III. The weekly gathering of the church to hear the gospel through word and sacrament (vv.7-12)

In vv. 7-12 Paul and his traveling companions spend a week in the port city of Troas. Paul has been in this city on at least two other occasions but has never been engaged in preaching the gospel here. In v. 7 we discover that while Paul has never preached the gospel here, yet there is a local church in existence in Troas. Most likely this church came into existence during those two years that Paul preached in Ephesus and during which we were told that all Asia heard the gospel. Troas is part of Asia. Verse 7 is the first time in the NT where we are told that Christians are meeting together on the first day of the week, on Sunday. The reason for their gathering on Sunday is to “break bread” together. Everyone agrees that this is a reference to the church gathering together to celebrate communion on the first day of the week. There is disagreement over whether this “breaking of the bread” was also a fellowship meal, a sort of potluck meal that included communion. Whether or not it includes the fellowship meal, what is remarkable is that we find a church in the pagan city of Troas that was begun without the direct involvement of an apostle and this church is doing what the first church of Jerusalem did, which we read about in Acts 2. They were devoting themselves to the “breaking of the bread.”

This meeting was taking place in the evening, most likely because most of the people in the church would have been working during the day and so could not meet any earlier. They are in a third floor “upper room”. The place is packed with people and as it gets dark, oil torches are lit to give light to the room. But they are not only gathered together to share in communion but they also are gathered together to listen to the preaching of the word, which in this case is done by none other than the apostle Paul himself. So there is not an open spot in the room. People are even sitting on window sills in order to have a place to listen.

One of those seated on the ledge of a window is a young boy, between the ages of 8 and 14 (This is based upon the Greek word used to describe him.). Paul is planning on leaving the next day. He has passed through this town twice, the last time he had been given an opportunity to preach the gospel but he had declined as he was in search of Titus. So it is not hard to imagine the fervency and urgency that he felt to be able to impart the full message of the gospel to these people in order to sustain them after he has gone. So he preached well past midnight. That means he was speaking for probably 5 hours. After midnight, this young lad named Eutyclus, trying to pay attention is finally overcome by sleep. Maybe he has sat by the window to get fresh air to fight off sleep. His head starts bobbing as he tries to stay awake and then finally sleep takes him completely and he tumbles over backwards and falls three stories to his death. You can imagine the screams and commotion as his parents fight to get through the packed room and down the stairs. The crowd of people pours out of the building in the dark and gathers around the weeping mother bending over her motionless child. Finally, the apostle Paul comes through the crowd, gently moves the grieving parents aside and takes the boy up in his arms. We are not told but most likely he is praying and as he prays he feels the life come back into the boy and commands the crowd to stop making such a commotion and announces that the boy is alive

Now, I want you to look at the next verse, #11. Once the child has been raised from the dead the congregation returns to the upper room to continue the worship service. They celebrate the Lord’s supper and probably share

a meal together and then Paul keeps teaching until morning. So there is another 4-5 hours of Paul teaching. Then in v. 12, following the worship service we are told that they took the youth away alive and were not a little comforted. In other words, the resurrected boy and his family remained in the congregation and participated in communion and the meal and the preaching and then they went home. That is remarkable. Nothing, not even the death and resurrection of a young boy could stop the congregation from remembering and rejoicing in the work of Jesus through communion and preaching. Why did Luke record this story for us? What are we to learn from it? The first thing to say is that it is dangerous to fall asleep during the sermon. You never know what might happen to you. You should know I don't have the gift of raising people from the dead who die as a result of falling asleep during sermons. I'm kidding.

We need to remember that Acts is a theological story aimed at describing how it is that Jesus is building his church among all the nations of the world, beginning at Jerusalem. Luke includes the stories he includes for the purpose of instructing the church through the ages about the work of God in and through his church. So what do we learn? First, this is the only story of Paul raising anyone from the dead. Thus, Luke connects Paul's work of preaching the gospel with the whole history of God's saving work through the OT and the NT. In seeing Eutychus raised from the dead by Paul we remember God raising young Isaac from the dead (figuratively speaking) through providing the ram to take his place; we recall Elijah raising the widow of Zarephath's young son from the dead through prayer and stretching himself upon the boy three times in an upper room; we recall Elisha raising the Shunnamite woman's boy from the dead in an upper room through personal contact; we recall Jesus raising the widow of Nain's son from the dead and the 12 year old daughter of Jairus; and we recall Peter's raising the widow Dorcas from the dead in the upper room in Joppa. Thus God confirms that Christ is the culmination of the OT and that this message about him is God's ongoing work to save his people out of this world. It is this message about Jesus that is the source of resurrection life. It would be an error to say that because Paul raised this boy from the dead then we should have an arrangement with the hospital to bring every young person who dies to our church so we can raise them from the dead. It would be an error to say that in the same way it would be an error to say that all church meetings must be held in the evening, in a third story room with lots of oil lamps burning and they should last all night. This is not Luke's aim in giving us this history. The raising of Eutychus confirms that the gospel preached by Paul and thus received by us is the only way to obtain the resurrection life of God.

Second, there is no question that this resurrection done in the middle of the gathered people of God listening to the gospel preached and participating in the gospel received in communion is meant to show that Jesus is chiefly present and speaking and working when the people of God gather together to share this meal and to hear this word. Right now and each Sunday Jesus is present to give his life to his people through our remembering his life, death and resurrection in communion and through the preaching of his word. We come together each week not to give anything to God for we have nothing to give but to receive from him his life. The life we receive is his eternal, resurrection life. Each week we come together to hear the words of promise made to us through Christ and thus, by faith, share in the life to come. We are given help by Jesus himself, through song and sacrament and word and prayer, by the Holy Spirit to persevere in our faith and to feed upon him so that as we travel through this troubled world we will not give up but come safely into our heavenly home. As v. 12 says, the result of our being together to receive his life is that we leave comforted by Christ himself.

Finally, John Chrysostom, the great preacher to the church in Constantinople in the late 300's AD makes this point in his sermon on this story. He points out how eager these people were to listen to the preaching of Paul through the night, in such an uncomfortable setting. Indeed, young boys, whom most assume would be uninterested in this sort of thing were present and listening. He then chastises his congregation for being unwilling to listen for even a short time and when they have been given such pleasant surroundings as the church building in Constantinople. He then says, "But it is Paul who spoke then, you say. What do you mean? Paul speaks now as well, or rather, it was not Paul either then or now, but Christ, and no one listens." So we come here each Sunday to hear Jesus speak in the songs and in communion and in the prayers and in the Scripture read and preached. He is not here to tell us how much he needs our help to fix this screwed up world. He is not here to give us a list of rules to keep in order to improve our moral lives. He is not here to tell us how

to have a happy marriage or great kids or secure retirements. He is here to tell us each week about our sins and how he is our savior from our sins. He is here to assure every believing sinner of his love and to confront every unbelieving or falsely believing sinner with their need to stop trusting in themselves, to abandon all hope of finding a happy life here in order to have that life which is truly life, that resurrection life he freely gives to everyone who believes.

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