

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Paul's Priorities

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Acts 20:1-16

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Introduction:

Good morning, Redeemer! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 20.

I will come right out and say that our passage for this morning is not a particularly glamorous text. Apart from one shocking detail, most of what we see here would be easy to rush past. Following the riot in Ephesus that we considered last Sunday, Paul sets off and makes his way back to Jerusalem. Here we find a record of Paul's travel log along with a brief account of his visit in Troas.

Why has Luke – inspired by the Holy Spirit – recorded these details for us? What are we meant to see as we look at the Apostle Paul's scheduling calendar?

To answer that question, let me ask you another one: If we projected your personal calendar up on the screen this morning, would you be okay with that? Think about it: If we could all see how you choose to allocate your time – the things that you prioritize and the things that you *don't* prioritize – we would learn a great deal about you. Wouldn't we? A person's schedule provides a glimpse into a person's heart.

That's what we find in our text for this morning. Look with me to Acts 20:1-16. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia. ² When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece.³ 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. ⁴ Sopater 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.⁵ These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas, ⁶ 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.

⁷ 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. ⁸ There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. ¹² And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted.

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ For 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. (Acts 20:1-16 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As I mentioned, at first glance there is really one detail that jumps out – or perhaps I should say, *falls out* – of this story. A young man named Eutychus was sitting in a windowsill as Paul preached past midnight and the poor lad dozed off and fell to his death. As a preacher, I am tempted to preach a one-point sermon on why it is dangerous to let your attention drift as you listen to sermons. As a listener, you probably want me to take note of that fact that long sermons can literally *kill* your listeners. However, the reason why Luke includes the Eutychus story is most certainly to take another opportunity to highlight the fact that Paul was being used by God to work miracles that paralleled what Jesus had done in his earthly ministry. If we were to preach a sermon around the death and resurrection of Eutychus, our one point would be: This miracle validates that Paul truly is an Apostle!

However, we've preached that sermon more than a few times over the course of this series, and the incident with Eutychus is only a small – albeit *spectacular* – piece of the passage in front of us.

Apart from the Eutychus detail what else are we meant to see here? I would argue that, by providing us with a glimpse into Paul's travel log, Luke is also providing us with a glimpse into the priorities of a faithful apostle and disciple maker. So, with the time that we have together this morning, I want to consider this passage and ask the question:

What Did Paul Prioritize?

Now, I want to begin with a bit of a qualifier before we jump in. Paul was an *apostle*. He was called and equipped to lay the *foundation* for the early church. To be clear; you and I are not. We don't BUILD the foundation. We build ON the foundation. That's an important distinction.

However, that doesn't mean that there are no lessons for us to apply as we consider Paul's life and ministry. Because – before Paul is an apostle – Paul is a Christian charged with the great commission. So, while there will be a few aspects that are unique to Paul's apostolic position, there will also be a great deal of overlap because he was operating with the same fundamental marching orders that we have received.

That being said, as we consider this travel log, what did Paul prioritize? First and foremost, we see that he prioritized:

1. The pursuit of the great commission

In case you're joining us for the first time, the great commission is found in Matthew 28:18-20 and it captures Jesus' final instructions to the church before he ascended to heaven. He told us:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18b-20 ESV)

Paul was LASER FOCUSED on the pursuit of this assignment. Making disciples of the nations to the glory of God was the central pursuit of the Apostle Paul's life and, in these verses, we catch a wonderful glimpse of how that shaped the way that Paul structured his schedule.

In order to fully understand Paul's travel log here, we need to look back a few verses at Acts 19:21. While Paul was still in Ephesus and before the riot ever broke out, we read:

Now after these events **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 ESV)

Paul sensed a great pull from the Spirit of God out of his ministry in the province of Asia. That's an interesting detail because ministry in Asia was BOOMING! Again, if we look back at Acts 19:10, we read:

This continued for two years, so that **all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord**, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:10 ESV)

By God's grace and through Paul's ministry, the gospel had been made known to the ENTIRE province of Asia. This was a GREAT AWAKENING! People were repenting of their sin and burning their books of magic in the streets! The life transformation was so deep and so widespread that the economy of the city was affected as people stopped purchasing idols! Can you imagine being part of a movement like that? Would you EVER want to leave?

But that's exactly what Paul did. He left. And in his letter to the Romans, he explains why he left:

and thus **I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named**, lest I build on someone else's foundation,²¹ but as it is written,

"Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand." (Romans 15:20-21 ESV)

But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you,²⁴ **I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain**, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. (Romans 15:23-24 ESV)

Paul's plan was to make Rome something of a new launching ground – much like he had with Antioch – and to spread out further north and west in the Mediterranean world. There were people in Spain who hadn't heard the gospel, and Paul was determined to do something about that.

Don't rush past this detail. Let's stop and reflect on this for a moment.

Paul left behind success, revival and familiarity. He had to. The Holy Spirit compelled him. His love for God compelled him. His passion to reach the lost compelled him.

And I *know* that Paul was an apostle and that he was given a specific assignment, and I *know* that we can't always draw a straight line from what *Paul* was called to do and what *we* are called to do. But the great commission – the call to go and make disciples – is a command that was given to ALL of us – not just the apostles.

So, as we consider the way that this priority shaped Paul's life, I think it's worth asking:

Is the Holy Spirit compelling someone here to go? Is He using this passage to push you out of that rut that you have been stuck in for years? Is He calling you to step out of your comfort zone and to finally open your mouth to share the gospel with the people that He has placed in your life? In fact – are we brave enough to honestly ask this question... – is He perhaps calling you to leave this country and to bring the gospel to an underreached part of the world?

The Spirit called Paul to leave success, revival and familiarity to bring the good news to those who had not heard it.

When we take up our cross and follow Jesus – when we surrender our lives to him and receive the gift of salvation – when we go through the waters of baptism and declare “I am a CHRISTIAN” – we are saying – whether we realize it or not – that God has our FULL permission to move us wherever He pleases. This is why the third and final question we ask before a person goes under the water is: “Are you resolved to follow Jesus wherever he may lead you, no matter the cost?” To be a Christian is to say a loud and resounding YES to that question!

We see that in the Apostle Paul's example for us here. The second priority we see in this text is:

2. The preservation of unity in the church

In order to see this, we will need to do a bit of homework. One important detail that you should know about this travel log is that it was during this trip that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans and the letter which we know as 2 Corinthians. If you want to know what was on Paul's mind during this trip, you can simply read those letters to fill in the blanks. And one of the key priorities in those letters was an offering that Paul was taking up for the church in Jerusalem. In Romans 15, for example, we read:

I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. ²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem **bringing aid to the saints.**²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. **For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.** (Romans 15:24-27 ESV)

Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 8, Paul writes at length about this offering and about how the churches in Macedonia had already made generous contributions to support the work. Paul – and this a brilliant display of leadership – recognized the financial difficulties that the church in Jerusalem was experiencing as an *opportunity* to strengthen the unity of the early church.

Remember, unity was NOT a word that would have been used to describe the relationship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the early days of the church. Jews *despised* Gentiles. Gentiles were unclean. Gentiles were not descendants of Abraham. Gentiles were not part of the family of God.

The first half of the book of Acts explains the beautiful and painful ways that the church had to wrestle and come to terms with this ever-expanding family that God was bringing together. We read Galatians 3:28 where Paul writes:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, **for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** (Galatians 3:28 ESV)

As we read that verse, we want to say: “DUH! Everyone knows that!” But everyone did NOT know that. At the time that Paul was ministering, everyone was still trying to wrap their head around this new lesson. The relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians was still fresh and fragile. And so, with this Jerusalem offering, Paul recognized that he had an opportunity to further bind these diverse groups together.

Not only did he bring an offering to Jerusalem, but he also brought representatives of the contributing Gentile churches. Look again at verses 4-5:

Sopater 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.⁵ These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas (Acts 20:4-5 ESV)

This isn't simply a group of Paul's friends who wanted to join him in his travels. One commentator explains:

Most scholars interpret the names in the list in terms of representatives of the churches that contributed to the collection Paul had organized for the church in Jerusalem.¹

Now, part of the reason why these men accompanied Paul was so that the giving of the offering would be above reproach. Paul didn't want to leave any room for people to be wondering if the *whole offering* made its way to Jerusalem or if some had made its way into Paul's pocket. Paul wanted to do the right thing the right way. That's wisdom.

But another part of the reason why these men accompanied Paul was as a gesture of unity to the church in Jerusalem. The offering itself was tremendously generous, but just think about how far these men travelled to bring greetings from their various congregations. Sopater the Berean travelled some 800 miles to help deliver this gift! We are talking about MONTHS of travel! This was costly.

But Paul counted the cost and determined that it was worth it.

¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 833.

Take a moment to reflect on that. Consider what GREAT LENGTHS Paul was willing to go to in order to preserve unity in the early church. “Well that early church didn’t face the kinds of disagreements that we face today.” Seriously? Have you read Paul’s letters? That early church included *hyper charismatic* Corinthians, *legalistic* Galatians, *formerly idol-worshipping* Gentiles, and *formerly racist* Jews! These churches that Paul planted and disciplined were filled with the kind of people that it would be really, REALLY easy to cut ties with! And yet, Paul went to GREAT LENGTHS to bind them together.

Does that priority still live on in the North American church today? It seems to me that – for all our claims of being “biblical” – we couldn’t be further from this biblical example. Forgot travelling 800 miles – many won’t even surrender their musical preferences for the sake of unity. Forget travelling 800 miles – many won’t even pick up the phone to sort through a disagreement. That is sinful. And that needs to change. Jesus prayed that it would. In John 17, we find Jesus praying for the church – for US – and he prays:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ **that they may all be one**, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21 ESV)

Paul understood this. The unity of the church was a priority in his life.

Finally, we see one last lesson in this passage. Paul clearly prioritized:

3. The nurturing of new believers

One of the things that I have come to love about the Apostle Paul is that he managed to navigate the balance of pressing forward in ministry without neglecting his responsibility to build up the churches that he left behind. We see that tension on full display in this passage.

Paul is pressing forward to Jerusalem because he senses the Spirit leading him into new territory, but rather than simply taking the fastest route, he winds his way through Macedonia and Asia to strengthen and encourage the churches he had planted.

I believe the reason why Luke recorded the story of Paul's visit in Troas was so that we might catch a glimpse into what happened when Paul returned to visit each of these churches that he had established. I suspect that the visit in Berea or Thessalonica was much the same, but when Luke had to decide which to include, he opted to use the story that included a resurrection! That's just wisdom on Luke's part.

As I mentioned earlier, the healing of Eutychus was another incredible sign of Paul's apostolic authority, but I want to draw your attention now to the details that come earlier in the story – the details that we might be tempted to rush past. Look again at verse 7:

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. (Acts 20:7 ESV)

This is such a sweet glimpse into Paul's priorities – and thus, into Paul's heart. He makes his way back through these churches that he helped to establish, and he joins them for their corporate worship. He breaks bread with them – which is language that is used in Acts to represent both the celebration of the Lord's Supper and the sharing of a meal. And then, seeing a final opportunity to bolster their faith and understanding, Paul teaches them late into the night.

After Eutychus dies and is then brought back to life, the congregation gathers again for more teaching! Look again at verse 11:

And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. (Acts 20:11 ESV)

Until daybreak! This was an ALL-NIGHTER! Paul had an important trip the next day, but he still chose to skip a night of rest and to spend his time instead teaching and equipping the young church in Troas.

As a pastor, I feel challenged by this example. Am I ready to pour myself out like this to nurture the church? Do I love like this? I feel that challenge in my soul. But lest you let yourselves off of the hook, just hold this example up to your parenting for a moment. How often do we make the

excuse, “I’m just too tired to pray with the kids tonight. I’m just too tired to teach them. I’m just too tired to engage. I need ME time. I need to stare at my phone. I need to check out.”

Look at the love in this story. The *undivided* attention. Paul breaks bread with this church, and then he encourages them and grows them in their faith all through the night before saying his final goodbyes.

I want to be a leader like that. In the church. In my home. In my community. I want to selflessly pour myself out to build up the people around me.

Can you imagine with me for a moment how much spiritual growth we would see in this congregation if we all adopted this priority as our own? Can you imagine what it would be like if each new believer in this place had two, three or four believers to come alongside them; to answer questions, and read the Bible, and point to good resources, and share meals, and do life?

If I could just encourage you for a moment, by God’s grace a lot of this is already happening here. It happens behind the scenes, outside of programs, so you can’t always measure it, but I see this. I see senior saints inviting teenagers out for breakfast. I see teenagers investing in the spiritual life of my nine-year-old son. I see new believers being picked up and driven to prayer group or Bible study and going out for coffee afterwards to discuss what was learned. I see it and I praise God for it! I truly do!

That’s what it looks like to make disciples! Take what you have been taught and share it with others. Come alongside them and give them all that you have so that they can one day share it with others. It’s not complicated! And, can I just remind you this morning: You were made for this! None of you are apostles. Most of you aren’t pastors. Some of you aren’t parents. But ALL of you – all of US – are called to be disciple makers!

Who are you building up? Who are you investing in? Who are you pouring yourself out for?

As we look at Paul’s schedule here, it doesn’t tell us everything we would like to know about him, but it certainly reveals his priorities. He prioritized the pursuit of the great commission. God deserves the praise of the nations, and that reality shaped Paul. He prioritized unity in the church.

Paul understood that God’s desire for His people was that they would be united under Christ, and he worked hard and paid the price to see that lived out. And Paul prioritized the nurturing of new believers. He wanted the church to stretch wide, but he was equally concerned that the church would grow *deep*. He gave all that he had to build up the believers around him.

At the beginning of this sermon, I asked how you would feel if your personal calendar was posted on the screen behind me for the rest of the congregation to see. As we conclude, I want to challenge you. One day, when we stand before the Lord, our calendar WILL be posted for the world to see. One day, in the same way that we have considered this text and parsed out Paul’s priorities, the Lord will look at our lives and parse out OUR priorities. So, here’s the challenge:

What does *your* calendar say about your priorities?

Further, what needs to *change* on your calendar to reflect the priorities that you want to spend your life for? Before you can say “yes” to the right things, you need to go back and say “no” to all the wrong things that have crowded them out.

Maybe it’s time to say “no” to seven late nights of Netflix so that you can start saying “yes” to waking up earlier to pray for your coworkers.

Maybe it’s time to say “no” to four nights of kids’ sports so that you can say “yes” to sharing a meal at your table and opening the Bible together.

Maybe it’s time to say “no” to four nights of church programming – yeah, the church can be guilty of this too – maybe it’s time to say no to all the programming so that you can say “yes” to inviting your neighbour into your home to start that gospel conversation.

Our calendars tell a story. Let today be the day when we resolve to use our calendars – to surrendering our lives – to tell HIS story. The story that changes the world.

To that end, would you pray with me?