

Sleeping in Church

Acts 20:1-12

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There is a certain sad truth to preaching in a church, and that is that it is pretty common to see people fall asleep during your sermons. This seems to be true across the board, regardless of who you are or where you preach. Another thing that seems to be true is that people assume they hide their sleeping well, and the preacher is none the wiser about what's happening. Sadly, that isn't true. A good speaker is engaging with his audience and seeking to read their body language to know whether he is effectively communicating or not.

So, pastors see all the different things going on in church. We see the person nodding off, but fighting to stay awake. We see the people with their heads back and mouths agape. We see the sideways glances people make to each other. We see the people whose eyes are open but are clearly somewhere else. We see people talking and joking with one another, and we see the people who have pulled out their phones and are no longer paying attention.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not offended by this. I understand that depending on how things have gone before you get to church, it is difficult to remain engaged during the worship service. I've sat in my fair share of church services while exhausted and faced the same struggle you sometimes do as well. But I do want you to know I see what happens while I'm preaching too!

Our passage this morning records probably the most famous account of someone falling asleep in church. Personally, I take great comfort in the fact that this young man fell asleep while the Apostle Paul was preaching. I'm confident Paul was not boring or irrelevant—but sometimes other forces take over and become too much. This passage serves as kind of a bridge in the book of Acts. It moves from Paul's third missionary journey to the final section of Acts. At first glance, it might seem like there's not much for us to learn from such a passage, but my hope is to draw some helpful lessons for us from this transitional passage.

Leaving Ephesus

Our passage picks up after the riot in Ephesus, where the craftsmen who made idols were upset that the Christians were hurting their bottom line.

When the uproar was over, Paul sent for the believers and encouraged them.

Then he said good-bye and left for Macedonia. ² While there, he encouraged the believers in all the towns he passed through. Then he traveled down to Greece, ³ where he stayed for three months. He was preparing to sail back to Syria when he discovered a plot by some Jews against his life, so he decided to return through Macedonia. (Acts 20:1-3, NLT)

Paul decided to leave Ephesus and then travel toward Macedonia. Notice what Paul's intention was in each of these meetings: he wanted to encourage the believers. Paul understood that the riot in Ephesus was likely to have shaken the Ephesian believers and may have even caused them to fear for their safety. They might have been tempted to back down from the gospel entirely. Paul wanted to remind them that despite the opposition they faced, they were on the right track, and they should keep going the way they were.

We are told he did this in all the towns he passed through. Paul understood the value of encouragement in the church. He understood that walking with Christ is often a difficult task, and that there are many forces that will seek to rob us of joy, sap us of our courage, and keep us on the sidelines. Paul's goal was to help these believers to keep going in their faith.

This is something we can all do regularly. We can and should encourage each other as we walk through life together. How do we do that? Here are some suggestions.

- Pray for someone. You may want to tell them you are praying for them (if you really are) or you may want to keep it to yourself. But praying is a way to encourage another believer.
- Let them know you see them. Many people become discouraged because they don't feel like their efforts matter. When you see people using their gifts, tell them you see them and appreciate them. You might be surprised how that lifts their spirits.
- Check in on them. Ask how they are doing, and then don't turn the subject to yourself. Don't try to compare situations. Just listen and let them know you care.
- Support them or offer to help them. When someone tries to start a new ministry, it's often frustrating. A simple way you can encourage them is by participating in what they are doing, or supporting them, whether that is financially, with prayer, with attendance, or by donating something to the cause.
- Send them a note or small gift. Often people just need to feel like they are seen and valued. A simple act can make a huge difference.

Paul understood the value of encouragement in the church, and we should too. Paul knew that solid teaching helped to give people a firm foundation and could help combat some of the false narratives the people may have been struggling with. But he also understood that solid teaching is not the only important element of Christian ministry. Building up others to help them become all God has made them to be is also important. We should focus on teaching but also on encouraging. My hope is that we will be known as a church that encourages one another. If we do that, we may be surprised at the way we see people blossom in their faith.

Paul's Travels

These opening verses also record Paul's travels, but the way Luke records it is not abundantly clear. Piecing together elements from Luke's account here and Paul's letters, we know that while Paul was in Ephesus, he had written to the church in Corinth,

because he had heard they were facing many hardships and struggles. This was the letter of 1 Corinthians.

After he left Ephesus, Paul apparently went to Troas, hoping to hear from his friend Titus, who had gone to Corinth. After he didn't hear anything, it appears that he left for Macedonia, where Philippi and Thessalonica were. While he was there, he received a positive report back from Titus, and likely wrote the letter of 2 Corinthians. After leaving Macedonia, he headed to Greece and stayed there for 3 months. Most people believe this 3 month period was spent in the city of Corinth. During this time, he wrote the book of Romans. He had planned to board a ship to head home from there, but discovered that some Jews had hatched a plot to have him killed on the journey (possibly being thrown overboard or something like that), so Paul wisely decided not to board the ship and instead returned to Macedonia (specifically Philippi) on foot, choosing to take the long way home.

Apparently Paul had quite the entourage with him.

⁴ Several men were traveling with him. They were Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea; Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica; Gaius from Derbe; Timothy; and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. ⁵ They went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. ⁶ After the Passover ended, we boarded a ship at Philippi in Macedonia and five days later joined them in Troas, where we stayed a week. (Acts 20:4-6, NLT)

We know a few of these men, and others we know almost nothing about. What we do know was where these men were from, because this seems to be the important part. If you notice, the men were from Berea, Thessalonica, Derbe, Lystra (where Timothy was from), and the province of Asia, which may have included Ephesus. These were most of the churches that Paul had planted.

In reading Paul's letters, it becomes clear why these men were traveling with him. He had encouraged these Gentile churches to take up a collection for the churches in Jerusalem. They had each been collecting money with the intent of bringing it back to the home church there. Paul again understood the importance of encouragement. The church in Jerusalem was likely struggling at this time, due to a famine. Paul saw this as an opportunity to remind both the Jewish-based church and the Gentile-based church that they were one church together and should care for each other. I suspect Paul saw this time of hardship as an opportunity for the church to grow closer together.

So these men were likely representatives from each of these churches, chosen to carry the money with Paul back to Jerusalem. But we may note that a couple of churches are missing from this list. Luke does not mention a representative from Philippi or Corinth.

Most people believe that Luke himself was chosen to be the representative from Philippi. We mentioned earlier in the book that Luke indicates his presence by switching the pronoun he uses. In verse 6, when the group was in Philippi, Luke suddenly switches to using the pronoun "we" again, indicating he was part of the group. The last

place Luke had used “we” was in Acts 16, when they were in Philippi, so Luke may have remained in Philippi during this time and now was their representative to Jerusalem. And Paul himself may have been the representative of the Corinthian church. If he had stopped there, they may have asked him to represent them. We can’t be sure, but it seems reasonable.

In all of this, we see again Paul’s concern for the welfare of the church at large. Paul was known for his teaching, and for introducing people to the gospel. But we also see in him the heart of a pastor. He wanted the church to function as one, and saw an opportunity for the Gentile churches to serve and care for the church in Israel.

Paul and his traveling companions got on a ship in Philippi and traveled to Troas, where they stayed a week.

Evening Worship in Troas

Luke does not record a great deal about their time in Troas, but does give us one story of note.

⁷ On the first day of the week, we gathered with the local believers to share in the Lord’s Supper. Paul was preaching to them, and since he was leaving the next day, he kept talking until midnight. ⁸ The upstairs room where we met was lighted with many flickering lamps. ⁹ As Paul spoke on and on, a young man named Eutychus, sitting on the windowsill, became very drowsy. Finally, he fell sound asleep and dropped three stories to his death below. ¹⁰ Paul went down, bent over him, and took him into his arms. “Don’t worry,” he said, “he’s alive!” ¹¹ Then they all went back upstairs, shared in the Lord’s Supper, and ate together. Paul continued talking to them until dawn, and then he left. ¹² Meanwhile, the young man was taken home alive and well, and everyone was greatly relieved. (Acts 20:7-12, NLT)

The first thing we should note is that the believers gathered on the first day of the week, which would have been Sunday. This was significant, as typically Jews would gather for worship on the Sabbath, which was Saturday. While it’s possible that this gathering occurring on Sunday was a coincidence since Paul just happened to be leaving the next day, it’s also may indicate that the early church quickly decided to make Sunday the Lord’s Day, choosing to worship on that day because it commemorated the day of Jesus’ resurrection. We cannot be sure of this, but we know that by the late 1st century or beginning of the 2nd century, this had already become the practice of the church.

It is also important to note what was part of their time together. They celebrated the Lord’s Supper, Paul preached, explaining the word of God to them, and it appears they fellowshiped together, spending time getting to know one another and caring for each other. These are the consistent elements of the church we see in Acts and should continue to be consistent elements in the church today.

Because Sunday would have been a work day for these people, the gathering took place at night. Everyone would have likely put in a full day’s work and then gathered for

worship that night. It is with all this in mind that we can understand the most surprising part of the story.

Paul began preaching to the people, and knowing he was going to have to leave the next day, he just kept going. He didn't want to squander this opportunity to impart wisdom to these believers. And it appears the believers didn't want to squander the opportunity to hear Paul speak either.

I do find it somewhat funny that Luke seems to indicate that even he had begun to feel that Paul was talking too long in the way he describes the fact that Paul "talked on and on". No matter how interesting Paul was (and I'm sure he was), there is a limit to how long people can concentrate. It had been a long day, and it was late.

Luke also records that there were flickering candles lighting the room. This gives us another important piece of information. This was likely a crowded room. The Christians had come out in full force to hear Paul speak. It was late, people were crammed everywhere. With the candles going, it was also probably getting warm. And the flickering candlelight would have made it light enough to see, but dim enough for sleep to become that much more appealing.

A young man, Eutychus, had apparently taken up a position sitting on the windowsill, probably leaning up against the frame. As got comfortable and the evening wore on, he began to lose the battle against sleep. Suddenly, everyone gasped as they saw Eutychus disappear from the window. They looked down and saw his body three stories below.

Luke tells us Eutychus was dead. He does not record that Paul raised him from the dead, though the similarities in Luke's description to other descriptions of resurrections in the Bible (like Elijah and Elisha raising young men from the dead) seem to indicate that Paul indeed raised him back to life. I'm inclined to believe that when Luke (who was a physician) said Eutychus was dead, he was truly dead. And Paul performed a tremendous miracle by raising him to life again!

After the adrenaline rush of this whole incident, the crowd returned upstairs where they talked more (Luke uses a different word here, indicating this may not have been Paul preaching) until morning. Paul and his companions left to begin their trip home, and Eutychus went back to his home, alive and well.

Conclusion

As I mentioned at the beginning, this is kind of a strange passage, in that it's a transitional passage in the book of Acts. But I still believe it has some important lessons to teach us.

First, we should be encouragers, not complainers. Most of us are hardwired to look for things that are wrong. Most of our jobs work this way. We are supposed to identify

problems and then figure out how to fix them. Dealing with people is not always as easy, however.

Something I often talk about with couples in pre-marital counseling is the importance of catching their partner doing things well. Our natural tendency in marriage is to complain about all the things our spouse isn't doing the way we want. But a person who only ever hears their spouse complain about them quickly becomes discouraged. A far better approach is to highlight the times they are doing well. Look for the times they are making an effort and offer encouragement. Let them know you appreciate them. That tends to be far more effective than complaining about what they aren't doing right.

The same is true in the church. We can come up with all sorts of things that aren't the way they should be. Those may be things about how the church functions or about specific individuals. But we are a body made up of flawed people. There are going to be things that are less than ideal. Our task is to look for the ways people are doing things right and encourage them. Let them know you see their efforts and value them. Something I have been trying to focus on is looking for progress, not perfection. When we see others making progress in their faith, choose to highlight that and encourage them, because that will give them the energy and drive they need to keep moving forward. We should help each other to move forward together, because when we do we all move closer to the Lord.

Second, we should guard against sleeping in church. While there is certainly a literal element to this—ideally you won't fall asleep during the worship service, and we should do what we can to help prevent that (like getting a full night's sleep the night before if we are able), I don't think literally falling asleep in church is the greatest danger. A far greater danger is having your eyes open, going through all the motions of church but not really being engaged. It's possible to be physically awake but spiritually asleep.

How do we avoid this? We must be intentional about our worship. Engage your mind and spirit in all that you do. Rather than simply going through the motions of singing, consider the words of the songs and the truths they contain. Rather than just listening to the scriptures being read, read along with them and ask questions. Join your hearts in prayer with those who are leading prayers in the service. During the sermon be intentional about asking yourself, how do I put this into practice in my own life? Even before you walk in the door, pray to the Lord to help you to be focused on Him and what He would have you learn or do today. And when you walk out, consider something you will work to put into practice this week.

Many in churches today are physically present but spiritually asleep. The danger of that is far greater than the danger Eutychus faced. We can deceive ourselves into thinking we're awake when we're not. While this passage of scripture may not seem like it teaches us much, I think it gives us some good examples to follow in our own lives. May we be a church that is spiritually awake and alert to opportunities to encourage one another, so that we all may live for Christ to the fullest of our abilities.

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