

Study 31: Acts 20

Introduction

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This period in this chapter covers quite a deal of Paul's letter writing. We have already noted that the 1st letter to the Corinthian church was written whilst Paul was at Ephesus. The period of chapter 20 includes his writing the second Corinthian letter, the Galatian letter, and the Roman letter.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

What did Paul do during the time described in verses 1 & 2?

What happened whilst Paul was in Corinth?

The return to Asia

Why did Paul stay in Troas for 7 days?

What happened at Troas?

The journey continues

What did Paul tell the elders?

What did Paul know about his journey to Jerusalem?

What was going to happen to the Elders?

Paul's own example to the elders

Paul's emotional departure

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *Compare the things that are important in your life, to the things that were important in Paul's life (vs24).*
- *What work is lacking in a church that does not have elders, and how can the church continue in the interim until elders are appointed?*

Read chapter 21 in preparation for next week

Notes for study 31: Acts chapter 20

Introduction

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This period in this chapter covers quite a deal of Paul's letter writing. We have already noted that the 1st letter to the Corinthian church was written whilst Paul was at Ephesus. The period of chapter 20 includes his writing the second Corinthian letter, the Galatian letter, and the Roman letter.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Paul left Ephesus to continue his journey early in the year AD 57, and wrote the second letter to the church in Corinth later in the year, followed by the letter to the churches of Galatia.

He then spent 3 months in Corinth at the early part of AD 58, and returned to the elders of Ephesus after Passover and before Pentecost in AD 58. The period of the chapter covers nearly a whole year.

Content: *What are the major events?*

Paul goes to Macedonia and Greece, Comes via Philippi to Troas. The meeting at Troas - then Assos to Mitylene, and to Miletus. Paul calls for the elders of the church to come from Ephesus, meeting with the elders.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Paul, Luke rejoins Paul, Eutychus, Ephesian elders.

Body of the Study

What did Paul do during the time described in verses 1 & 2?

Paul was already thinking about moving on, and his plans were to go to Corinth, then to Macedonia, and then come back again to Corinth. He outlined his plans in 1 Cor 16:5-6 when he wrote the first letter to the Corinthians.

Erastus and Timothy had been sent to Macedonia to prepare for Paul's visit (19:22). Titus had been sent to Corinth to correct some of the problems in the church, and Paul was expecting him to then come to Troas, where they would meet (2 Cor 7:5-7). However, when Paul arrived in Troas, Titus was not there (2 Cor 2:12-13). This caused Paul to change his travel plans, and rather than go from Troas to Corinth and then into Macedonia, he went into Macedonia first. The Corinthians criticised him for changing his plans, and Paul responds to this in the second letter (2 Cor 1:15- 24).

As Paul "*passed through*" the Macedonian area, he went preaching the gospel on an evangelistic tour – not just a trip that took him through the city on his way to somewhere else. Paul visited again the churches of Macedonia at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, and Luke describes how he "*...had encouraged them with many words...*" (20:2). Paul describes his feelings at this time:

"...For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn--conflicts on the outside, fears within. ⁶ But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷ and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever..." (2 Cor 7:5-6 NIV)

Paul was quite concerned as to what had been happening in Corinth, and why Titus had not joined him at Troas. He could not help but think of the problems that Titus must have been

still trying to sort out. Paul then moved on to Macedonia, where he found Titus at (most likely) either Thessalonica or Philippi.

From Thessalonica (or possibly Philippi) Paul immediately wrote the second letter to the church at Corinth, and writes of his relief that the church had corrected the problems and had received Titus, who “...told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more...” (2 Cor 7:7 NKJV). It was also around this time that Paul heard about the Judaising teachers harassing the churches in Galatia, and he consequently wrote the letter to the Galatian churches. (The second letter to Corinthians and the Galatian letter have many similarities, suggesting that they were written around the same time). When Paul came to Corinth, he then wrote the letter to the church at Rome.

Paul spent some time making this journey from Ephesus, and rather than being a hurried trip it probably took perhaps 6 months.

What happened whilst Paul was in Corinth?

Paul “...came to Greece, and spent three months...” (18:2-3), almost certainly in Corinth. This was a follow-up after his initial 18 months visit (now around 5 years since he left). Some writers place another visit of Paul to Corinth during his stay at Ephesus, after he had written the first letter to the Corinthian church, and Timothy had reported back that it was not well received. Some evidence for this is in the words of Paul that “...this will be the third time I am coming to you...” (2 Cor 13:1 NKJV). On this visit, he was coming to correct the problems, and yet “...many of them had still not repented...” (2 Cor 12:21).

Regardless of whether or not he made a short trip from Ephesus, Paul was well known and well respected by the brethren at Corinth. During the “current” visit (20:2), he must have still been doing a lot of outreach, since “...the Jews plotted against him...” (20:3) which shows that they reacted to his visit. Paul was making a collection for the poor at Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-4). His instruction was for Titus or Timothy to collect the money, but the Corinthians had ignored the instruction, and Paul had to write about it in the second letter (2 Cor 8:1 – 9:15). He almost embarrasses them into doing the right thing by comparing them with the Macedonians (by which he means the Philippians). Corinth was a wealthy city which made its money from the taxes applied to the trade through the city in both directions (North-South, and East-West).

Paul was carrying a large sum of money and this may have been the motivation for the Jewish attack against him. Paul’s intention was to return to Jerusalem with the benevolent gift, and then to make a visit to Rome, and then to Spain (Rom 15:24). He was planning to make the return trip to Jerusalem by sea (20:3), but “...when the Jews plotted against him, as he was about to sail to Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia...” (20:3 NKJV). It is likely that the Jews had heard about the large sum of money he was carrying, and so he changed his travel plans. Several brethren accompanied Paul, from many of the churches that he had established. It appears that these brethren set sail from Cenchrea just as Paul had intended to do, but without Paul, so they were acting as a decoy. They then waited for Paul at Troas. The brethren had most likely brought the collection from the different churches – Berea – Thessalonica. It is interesting to note that Gaius and Timothy had come from Galatia, and Tychius and Trophimus from Asia (*the seven churches of Asia?*). But why would they go to Corinth with the money, and then have to go back again to Troas / Ephesus? It is more likely that Luke’s intention is that these brethren were *representing* the churches as stated.

It is also noteworthy that there is no mention of anyone from Philippi, a church that was well noted for its benevolence to Paul during his work in Thessalonica and other places. Luke has joined Paul at Philippi, and he again uses the first person to describe Paul’s travels “...were waiting for us at Troas...but we sailed away from Philippi...” (20:5-6 NKJV). Considering the mention of Berea and Thessalonica, but no mention of Philippi in 20:4, then Luke was the representative from the church at Philippi, where he had laboured for five years is most likely.

The return to Asia

The overland trip to Philippi would have taken several days (probably a week) on foot, and would have taken them through Berea and Thessalonica again. It is hard to imagine that Paul and Luke only made overnight stops with the brethren in those places, and they probably would have stayed at least two nights in each place so that they could rest as well as visit the brethren. Likewise the stop in Philippi would have been made, with some time in Neapolis waiting for a ship to take them where they wanted to go (c/f 16:11-12).

The journey from Philippi to Troas was made by ship, and began after “...*the Days of Unleavened Bread...*” (20:6 NKJV), which included both the Passover feast and the feast of Unleavened Bread. This places Paul’s departure as early AD 58, nearly a year after he left Ephesus. The trip to Troas took five days, and was a slow trip in adverse conditions.

At Troas, Paul caught up with the brethren who came from Corinth, and “...*stayed there for seven days...*” (20:6). There was already a church at Troas, and Paul had visited there about a year earlier, but then left to go to Corinth (2 Cor 2:12-13).

Why did Paul stay in Troas for 7 days?

Some suggest that Paul stayed in Troas to start the church there. But the church had been started many years earlier, possibly on the second journey, and Luke joined the second journey from there (16:10) to go to Philippi where he remained (apparently) for some time.

We know that Paul “...*stayed seven days...*” (20:6) in Troas, and that he left in the very early hours of Monday morning. Therefore he must have arrived in Troas on the previous Monday, and left Philippi on the Thursday before that. With the other brethren who had assembled in Troas, it would have been a time of great encouragement to the brethren.

We are not told what they might have done in the way of teaching and preaching, however when the Sunday came “...*upon the first day of the week, ... the disciples came together to break bread...*” (20:7). Does this mean that they came together to do this every day, and Luke only happens to mention the time that they did it on Sunday?

We have in this verse an apostolically approved example of what the early church was doing in coming together to “*break bread*” – which is to partake of the Lord’s Supper. We **know** that it is right to come together on the first day of the week to do this, because that is exactly what the apostle did here on this occasion. Now, it might be possible that the church in Troas also came together on Thursday night and “*broke bread*”, but that is a matter of pure conjecture! We **just don’t know** – and because we don’t know, we have **no authority** to do it. We **do know** that it is right to do it on the first day of the week, and we **don’t know** whether it is right to do it any other day – and so we can say that the New Testament (in this verse) **authorises us** to come together on the first day of the week to break bread.

There are some “translations” of the scriptures that depict this verse as *Saturday night*. However the Greek is *μια* (*mia* 3391) and is always translated **one**, or **first**.

It is possible that it was a coincidence that Paul waited for seven days in Troas, and it was at the end of this time that Luke happens to record the partaking of the Lord’s Supper. However it seems far more likely that Paul has delayed his stay in Troas for the very purpose of meeting with the church when they came together to meet on the first day of the week. In 1 Cor 16:2, Paul tells the Corinthians that “...*upon the first day of every week...*”, they should lay aside money for the collection, and this same instruction had also been given to the churches of Galatia (1 Cor 16:1). This reinforces the first day of the week as the time that the church normally assembled, and it was for this reason that Paul waited in Troas for 7 days. It was the purpose for which the church in Troas had come together.

Further, after the meeting, Paul left to go overland to Assos, but the ship had left earlier. If the church had met *whenever it was convenient* to “break bread”, then why didn’t they do it the day before, so that Paul could have gone with the ship? It appears that Paul was in control of the ship (as he did not want to sail into Ephesus, but called for the elders to come to Miletus

20:16). So, in order to ensure that he met with the church on the first day of the week when it assembled to break bread, Paul made a 35 km walk overland to join the ship at Assos.

What happened at Troas?

The church had gathered in an upper room, and Paul made a long speech – continuing until midnight. Paul kept preaching for such a long time after dark, because “...*there were many lamps in the room...*” (20:8). Luke displays his first hand knowledge of the situation, and provides details of accuracy even in such trivial matters.

Eutychus fell asleep during Paul’s preaching. He was certainly not the only person ever to have fallen asleep during a sermon, but was the first that we have record of. Paul’s compassion is interesting to note, as he did not stop midway through his sermon to awake Eutychus “*How dare you fall asleep whilst I’m preaching!*” but continued on acknowledging that the hour was late. Whilst Eutychus had come to worship God (he might have made the excuse for staying home because he was just too tired), he was unable to fight off the physical weakness. Falling down dead, Paul embraced him, and brought him back to life.

After this, they came back and “...*had broken bread and eaten...*” (20:11). The question is – it is now after midnight – is this the time when they partook of the Lord’s Supper? We have two mentions of the term “broke bread” here, just as we do in Acts 2:42, 46. As in that instance, one of those occasions refers to the Lord’s supper (2:42) and the other to their sharing of meals together (2:46). Also in this instance, we have the disciples coming together *to* (for the purpose of) break bread on the first day of the week. We have to assume that they did what they said that they were going to do, and partook of the Lord’s supper on the first day of the week exactly as they had purposed. After such a long meeting, and with Paul ready to soon depart for a 35 km walk, it is perfectly natural that this was an appropriate time to eat a meal, and that they should do it together.

The ship would have left Troas in the very early morning, and Luke travels with the other brethren to the ship “...*we went ahead to the ship...*” (20:13NKJV). Paul however travelled by land, “...*when he met us at Assos, we took him on board...*” (20:14 NKJV) which would have given him more time in Troas, perhaps a few hours sleep, and also some time of solitude on his walk.

The journey continues

Paul met the ship and the others at Assos, and sailed to Mitylene, and then past Ephesus to Miletus. He “...*called for the elders of the church...*” (20:17 NKJV) to come. The ship must have been at Miletus for several days, as it would have taken a day to send a message to the elders, and another day for them to come. He called for the spiritual leaders in the congregation. That was not the evangelist, nor “the Pastor” – (although it was the pastors), but the elders of the church. As in every other case in the New Testament, a plurality of elders had the role of overseeing the local congregation. We don’t know when the elders were appointed in the church at Ephesus, nor how many there were. However Paul’s description, and what he has to say to them suggests that there were perhaps 7 or 10 or maybe more (It doesn’t sound like just two or three).

What did Paul tell the elders?

The time with the elders is one of the most emotion filled passages in the New Testament. Paul believes that this might be the last time that he will see them, and that they will see him. From the very beginning (5 years ago – AD 53) Paul received a very strong reception in Ephesus. He hurried back there and then spent nearly three years working with the church in Ephesus, and had been gone about a year. The affection that Paul had for these men, and they for him is obvious in this passage.

In the New Testament three Greek words are used to describe the elders, and for each of these Greek words there are two and sometimes three English words. In this passage (and also in 1 Pet 5), all three Greek words are used to clearly describe the same group of people:

AC 20:17 From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders (presbuteros) of the church. ¹⁸ When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time

AC 20:25 "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (episkopos). Be shepherds (poimain) of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. (NIV)

Presbuteros (4245) is translated *elders, presbytery, old men.*
Episkopos (1985) is translated *bishop, overseers.*
Poimain (4166) is translated *feed, rule, shepherd, pastors.*

So, we have 9 English words describing the same office, each with a slightly different inflection on the role – The first described what he looks like (elder, old), the second how he acts (oversees), and the third what he does (feeds, rules, shepherds). [Further discussion on the function and form of the eldership can be found in the studies of the Pastoral Epistles, Studies 12 and 13].

Paul addresses the elders:

- His example before them (both teaching publicly, and privately, and in serving with humility)
- His exhortation to the elders to accept the responsibilities of the oversight
- Be aware of the coming dangers
- Depend on prayer and the Word of God
- Support the work through their own labour

The address is unique in that it is the only example we have of Paul speaking to and exhorting Christians. Paul describes the years of his ministry, the tears that he has shed with them and the emotional bonding between them, and the fears that he has for them after he has left.

What did Paul know about his journey to Jerusalem?

Paul did not know what was ahead “...see, I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there...” (20:22 NKJV). However he recognised his sense of duty that compelled him to go. (We will see some more of this in the next chapter). However he was aware that “...the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me...” (20:23 NKJV). In every city that he had travelled to, the revelation must have come through the prophets, but the content of the revelations have not been passed on to us.

Whilst Paul as a prophet had the gift of prophecy, he was unable to use that gift for his own benefit (to see what was going to happen to himself). He also had the gift of healing, but was unable to use it to remove his *thorn in the flesh*. This tells us quite a bit about the nature of the miraculous gifts and how they could be applied – they could not be used for personal gain.

His journey to Jerusalem may even result in his death “...but none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself...” (20:24 NKJV). He was prepared even for that. He had fully discharged his responsibility to teach and preach, so that he could say that “...he has kept back nothing that would be useful to them...” and has “...taught them the whole counsel of God...” (20:20, 27).

What was going to happen to the Elders?

Paul charged the elders with the responsibility of feeding and shepherding the flock. Their role was not to be a board of directors of the congregation, but one of guiding, shepherding, and nurturing the Christians in the congregation. It requires the ability to relate one-on-one to the members, to be able to thoroughly know the scriptures so that errors can be corrected, and to be able to teach so that the members can be rooted and grounded in the truth. The skills are

to be acquired by the successful raising of the elders own family, and he will be able to understand the struggles, trials, successes and failures of the christians as they grow in the Lord because he has been there and steered his family through the same pathway. Finally, the elder is to be mature (which is why he is to be an elder – not a younger!) and not a novice in these things.

The church at Ephesus had only been established for about 5 years, and yet they have obviously a strong eldership. Some of these men may have been Jewish, and had a good grounding in the Old Testament scriptures. However, it is unlikely that an eldership would be successful in a church made up of both Jews and Gentiles, if all of the elders were Jews. This leaves the probability that at least some of them were converted Gentiles who had only known God for less than 5 years – and yet their zeal, knowledge, and devotion made them equipped for the eldership.

Paul gave a strong warning about the falling away that was to come “...*savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock...*” (20:29 NKJV). The falling away was going to not only affect the elders, but would be led by some of them “...*from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves...*” (20:30 NKJV). They were not only going to fall themselves, but also lead others away with them. Four or five years later, Paul wrote the Ephesian letter as a call to faithfulness. My study of the book of Ephesians treats the whole letter on this basis, and the context of Paul’s discussion with the Ephesian elders is discussed there.

Paul’s own example to the elders

Paul had already described how he lived amongst them (20:18), and how his teaching was complete and open (20:20-21, 27). His example was exemplary, and he did not contemplate the possessions of others “...*I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by labouring like this, that you must support the weak...*” (20:33-35 NKJV). He also mentions his self-support in 1Cor 4:12, which was written whilst he was in Ephesus. Paul not only worked to support himself, but also those who were with him, and to help others. In such a way, the elders need to support the weak, and remember that giving is better than receiving. Paul quotes the Lord here “...*it is more blessed to give than to receive...*” (20:35), a quote which is not recorded in any of the gospels.

Paul’s emotional departure

From the time that he first arrived in Ephesus (18:20 – AD 53), Paul had a very good relationship with the brethren (starting with the Jews). This continued throughout his period of ministry (19:1-41 – AD 54-57). He “calls in” on his return journey to Jerusalem early (after Passover, and before Pentecost) in AD 58. Paul has known and worked with these brethren for most of their christian lives. He knows them well, and they know him likewise.

Paul knows that troubles lie ahead in Jerusalem (20:22-23), but he does not know what they will bring. Potentially this is the end of the road as far as his association with these brethren is concerned. [However, there is evidence that he did get to visit Ephesus again on his fourth missionary journey, around AD 65 – 1 Tim 1:3; 1 Tim 3:14-15; 2 Tim 1:16-18]. Paul’s latter life and fourth missionary journey will be considered in one of the final studies in this series.

Paul is having a final emotional departure with the elders from Ephesus and “...*he knelt down and prayed with them all...*” (20:36 NKJV). The great emotional bond between them is strong and their hearts are bonded together after such a long period of work and the several visits that Paul had made to Ephesus – not to mention the persecution that caused Paul’s departure from them. “...*They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again...*” (20:37-38 NIV).

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