

Lesson 29: Acts 20:1-21:16 Defense by Miracle, Message and Prophecy

Introduction

Our primary theme in this section is the defense of Paul and his ministry. As a secondary theme, Luke's background narrative provides a number of interesting details about the practice of the earliest Christian churches. We will consider both themes in this lesson.

In our previous lesson, we recognized a way to structure Acts Part VI. The division of Acts into six parts marked off by the summary statements of church growth and expansion are not unique. The scholars have long recognized that division in Acts. The way I have sub-divided those six parts comes from David Gooding's book, *True to the Faith*. I have said that before. I just want to make sure I am giving Gooding the credit. He sees five movements in this final part of Acts, all beginning with a danger avoided, followed by a misconception corrected, concluding with a defense provided. That structure seems very helpful to me and true to the text.

We considered already the riot in Ephesus and the statement of the town clerk. That was our "danger avoided" and "misconception corrected" for this first movement. In this lesson we turn to the defense provided. The defense here is longer than we will find in some of the other movements. It consists of more than a speech. There are three sections to the defense. In Troas, Paul will raise a young man from the dead. That miracle is powerful testimony that God is with Paul. Following that miracle, Paul will give a speech to the Ephesian elders that defends his ministry among them. In the final section, the sovereignty of God is emphasized as he leads Paul to suffering in Jerusalem. When bad things happen to messengers of God, one response is to assume they are not really a messenger of God at all. Or if they were, they made a mistake this time. But through the words, the prophecy delivered by the Holy Spirit we are reassured that the trials Paul is about to suffer in Jerusalem are not news to God. It is the plan. Paul is His servant, and He is leading His servant into some hard times.

During this whole section Paul is on the move. There is quite a bit of travel recorded here. And there is a lot of meeting with Christians along the way. So, as we consider the three-part defense, I will also be able to point out some of the detail about the early Church, and we'll just do that as we go as our secondary theme. Let's start with the travels that take Paul from Ephesus to Troas, where the young man is raised from the dead. This is Acts 20:1-12.

Paul's ministry defended through an incredible miracle (Acts 20:1-12)

¹ After the uproar had ceased [*that's referring to the riot in Ephesus*], Paul sent for the disciples, and when he had exhorted them and taken his leave of them, he left to go to Macedonia. ² When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece. ³ And *there* he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. ⁴ And he was accompanied by Sopater of Berea, *the son* of Pyrrhus, and by Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. ⁵ But these had gone on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas.

Let's pause here. We covered Paul's plan in our last lesson. His plan is to strengthen the churches in Macedonia and Achaia, to take a financial gift from these Gentile churches back to Jerusalem to encourage Christian unity, then to travel to Rome to further establish that church in the Gospel, and after all of that to re-engage his passion for pioneer missions in a journey to the western Roman province of Spain.

Luke tells us Paul spent three months in Macedonia and Achaia. But he does not tell us anything about Paul's time there other than the very broad statement that Paul exhorted the disciples and changed his travel itinerary when he discovered a plot against him by Jewish adversaries.

Paul's letter to 2 Corinthians reminds us that there is always more going on that is not being reported. 1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus to Corinth. And if you know that letter, you know

it is full of drama. The church had divided into factions. The theology of some about the resurrection of Jesus had gone off track. The behavior of some lacked a standard appropriate to the Gospel, being disorganized and unloving in their weekly gatherings and, in some cases, practicing outright immoral behavior.

We see in his letters that Paul wants to go to Corinth, but he is hesitant. He does not want to go unwelcomed unless he is absolutely forced to do so. He spoke plainly in 1 Corinthians, addressing numerous theological and behavioral issues, communicating his disappointment and his dismay. He does not know how they are going to receive that correction.

Instead of sailing from Ephesus directly across to Corinth, Paul follows the coastline of Asia Minor north to go up and around. He will sail over to Macedonia from Troas, following the same path as his second missionary journey, visiting the churches he had planted, starting with Philippi. It's going to take him some time to get down to Corinth.

We might think Paul would be eager to get to there and would have sailed straight over from Ephesus. But we find out in 2 Corinthians that he is giving them some space to process his letter. Paul had sent Titus to Corinth and had hoped to meet up with him in Troas to find out how the Corinthians responded to that other letter. In 2 Corinthians 2:12–13, he wrote,

¹² Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.

Paul decided not to wait for Titus. He continued his trip to strengthen the churches but with significant angst over the situation in Corinth. Paul is writing that he has left Troas. That means he didn't write 2 Corinthians until he already got over to Macedonia. That letter is a positive one. It's communicating joy over reconciliation between the Apostle and the church. We find out how it's able to be positive later in chapter 7 of 2 Corinthians. This is verse 5-7.

⁵ For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. ⁶ But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; ⁷ and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.

The discord with Corinth had torn Paul up. He admits to “fears within” and being “depressed.” So, when Titus finally met up with him and spoke of the sorrow of the Corinthians and their longing to see Paul, he was greatly comforted, and he was rejoicing. It is a very human piece of writing that shows us his pastor's heart. It is also another reminder that Luke's story here in Acts is not about the growing pains of the churches Paul has planted. Those struggles are happening. And we get record of those struggles in the epistles. There are two truths. The planting of these churches was followed by a lot of grief, struggle, sin, sorrow, people walking away. And the planting of these churches resulted in eternal life and lasting fruit, and people stepping up and growing strong. The focus of Acts is on the latter reality: the positive truth of God's work by the Holy Spirit through human witnesses to bring all peoples into the body of Christ. That's Luke's focus. Luke gave us a little glimpse of that positive fruitfulness in verse 4.

You know, when he listed all those names, and did you notice how Luke identified where they are from according to their city or their province? One is from Berea in Macedonia, two are Thessalonians, two are from Galatia - because we know that Timothy is from Galatia - and two are from Asia. Paul is not going to Jerusalem alone. He has seen fruit in his travels. And these Gentiles are coming with him from churches he had planted. And in their coming they will personally deliver their gift to the poor in Judea, and they will give witness to what God had done through Paul in their cities.

During his three months in this area, Paul makes a loop sailing from Troas he left Asia Minor, he crossed over to Europe, he traveled through Macedonia down to Achaia, and then he returned back up through Macedonia to sail again over to Troas. We pick back up in Philippi in verse 6.

⁶ We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days; and there we stayed seven days. ⁷ On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul *began* talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. ⁸ There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. ⁹ And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. ¹⁰ But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, "Do not be troubled, for his life is in him." ¹¹ When he had gone *back* up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while until daybreak, and then left. ¹² They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.

God used Paul to raise the young man Eutychus from the dead. That miracle puts Paul into a very small, select group people. Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, Peter, and now Paul. That's it. This miracle provides another parallel between Peter and Paul. Both men are affirmed as God's chosen Apostles, and both are connected to the Lord Jesus through the miracles of resurrection. This miracle as an affirmation of Paul is the main point of this story. I think that's why Luke included this here in the record.

But then there is a lot more for us to notice in the detail that Luke has provided. We have seen Paul regularly visiting the synagogue on the Sabbath in city after city. Here, Luke tells us they gathered together to break bread on the first day of the week. The Sabbath is the last day of the week. The first day of the week is the day of Jesus' resurrection. This is an example of Christians coming together on Sunday. Gathering to break bread can mean gathering to eat a meal together. But in the Christian context, we understand that Luke is talking about sharing the Lord's supper, which in early Church quite likely included eating a meal together. The breaking of bread does not happen immediately. First, Paul speaks. And it's interesting how much Luke emphasizes he spoke for a long time. Because he spoke for a long time till midnight, before Eutychus fell and died. This doesn't mean he has spoken all day. We should assume the gathering began at night. Roman civilization did not recognize a 7-day week and did not have a weekend. The concept being used here, referring to the first day of the week, is a Jewish concept. This is the Jewish ordering of the calendar. Believers were not getting the day off. They had to work during daylight hours. And that assumption is affirmed by Luke's reference to many lamps in the room.

Who hasn't fallen to sleep at some point in a 20-minute sermon? And in this case, it's dark. It's after midnight, and Paul has been talking on and on and on. And we don't take this as the norm for every Sunday meeting. But when you have the Apostle Paul with you and he is leaving town the next day, you want him to teach. So, he taught long enough for Eutychus to become drowsy and to really fall asleep. And he had this coveted seat by a window to benefit from the cool air, but window is open, without glass or screen, and then he is sitting so close to the edge, and maybe that is not the wisest choice. It's late at night. But he falls asleep, and he loses his balance, and he tumbles out of the window. It is a horrible scene! If you can imagine that at a church. We know the end. So, it becomes joyful, but before you get there you just think you're having church and a young man falls out of the window. So along with the others, Paul rushes down and falls on the boy, embracing him.

Why motivated Paul to do that? You know, that's curious. It's actually kind of weird when you think about it. What idea is in his head? Peter did not do that. Peter raised Tabitha by speaking to her. "Tabitha, arise." Peter's method followed all three accounts of Jesus raising someone from the dead. The widow's son, Jairus' daughter, Lazarus, Jesus spoke, and they woke up and they came back to life.

Why didn't Paul do as Jesus and Peter did? Why didn't he just speak to the boy, "Eutychus! Arise!" It is interesting to note that Paul was not present when Jesus' raised the dead. Peter was. Peter saw Jesus do it. Peter did it like Jesus. Paul wasn't present when Peter raised Tabitha. He didn't see that, either. It is also interesting to note that Paul was not the first person in the Bible to lie down on a person in order to raise them from the dead. So, who did that? Elijah laid down on a widow's son, and Elisha laid down on the Shunammite's son. Both of them did it that way. They laid down and they embraced them. And Paul would, of course, have known those stories, as a Pharisee of pharisees he has got it all memorized.

The comparison suggests flexibility to our method as the Holy Spirit works through us. This is not about getting the right formula. If Paul had spoken, I believe Eutychus would have risen from the dead. But he doesn't. He lays down, because that's what he has seen in the Word. We are not manipulating the Spirit of God with precise words or actions. That's not Christian spirituality. There's not this formula we have got to get just right. Three things are crucial for us: are we living in dependence on Jesus Christ? Are we are filled with the Spirit? And does God will the thing to be done? The method, our specific words and actions, those will likely follow from whatever examples we have seen. Peter was discipled by Jesus, so Peter acted as he had seen Jesus do. Paul had never seen anybody do something like this, but he is moved by God to do it, to try it, and the example he has seen is in the written Word. In that sense he is discipled by Elijah and Elisha. He modeled himself after them. The spiritual disciplines and practices, there's some sense where we want to do them in our closet. You don't want everybody to know that you're fasting or praying or that you're being spiritual. But Jesus did do ministry in front of His disciples. And He is praying with them, and they are seeing Him at work. And that is very important in the church, because we have younger believers interacting with older believers, because discipleship is more like an apprenticeship. The younger ones are looking, they are trying to learn how do I do this. How do I study the Bible? How do I pray? How do I walk in the power of the Holy Spirit? How do I trust God to work through me spiritually? And it's not that they need to learn a formula from older believers who have gone before, but they need models to imitate as they, also, are walking with Jesus.

Paul's ministry defended in his speech to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:13-38)

Travel to Miletus (13-17)

Paul will speak to this kind of modeling in his speech to the Ephesian elders. He was a model for them. That speech is the second element of defense in this section. It's in Acts 20:13-38. There is a lot here. Rather than read the whole passage, I will go paragraph by paragraph. First, we have to get closer to Ephesus. Here is our travel section. This is verses 13-16.

¹³ But we, going ahead to the ship, set sail for Assos, intending from there to take Paul on board; for so he had arranged it, intending himself to go by land. ¹⁴ And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene. ¹⁵ Sailing from there, we arrived the following day opposite Chios; and the next day we crossed over to Samos; and the day following we came to Miletus. ¹⁶ For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. ¹⁷ From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

If we look up on a Bible map, what's going on is Paul is traveling on coastal ships that are going from port town to port town in about a day. The sea worked as a major highway so that ships are taking people and goods just on day trips down the coast, however far you need to go. Luke told us that Paul set sail from Philippi after the Passover and week of Unleavened bread. Here he tells us that Paul wants to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. That's a celebration that has lost importance in the modern church. We don't have this big cultural celebration of Pentecost, at least not anywhere I have lived. But I imagine there was still a lot of excitement surrounding the celebration of Pentecost and the birth of the Church in Jerusalem during that first generation. And this is a feast you would want to be at. If at all possible, you would want to be at it in Jerusalem. Paul has 50 days from

Passover to Pentecost. That's why it's called, Pentecost. It's fifty days after Passover. That means, fifty days, he's got to get from Philippi to Jerusalem. And he needs to find a ship that is going to make a more direct voyage to Syria, not hopping from town to town all the way around the coast. He is not in a huge rush. But to stay in Ephesus itself would have required showing hospitality to a number of people. Paul doesn't just go somewhere he has lived for two years and not spend time. And you also never know what kind of emergency might come up, causing delay. So, he decides instead to pass Ephesus and stop a couple of days in Miletus and have the Ephesian leaders travel to meet him there.

Luke gives us a summary of the speech Paul made to the elders. This is the only speech to a Christian audience Luke gives us in the book of Acts. Luke's pattern is to give us just one speech in a particular context. He gave us an example of Paul speaking to Jews in a synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. And that example can at least help us to imagine the types of things Paul said when he went into various synagogues. He gave us an example of Paul speaking to non-Jews at the Areopagus in Athens. And that was a specific speech for that group of people but in another sense, it's an example of what Paul might say when he is speaking outside to a pagan evangelistic kind of audience. This speech may be similar to exhortations Paul gave to believers in places like Corinth and Philippi. There is some similarity. But also the speech is also quite contextualized around a specific moment of farewell. And the audience is not the church. The audience is the leadership of the church. Paul's farewell address to all the people in a congregation would have been different. This speech breaks up into three parts. The first part is in verses 18-27.

1 (18-27)

¹⁸ And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, ²¹ solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. ²⁴ "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. ²⁶ "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

To make sure that you are correctly tracking with an author's train of thought, it is sometimes helpful to jump ahead to the "therefore." A "therefore" in the text introduces a logical conclusion derived from what has just been said. This is Paul's "therefore."

²⁶ "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

So, Paul is stating a defense about his ministry. It is also helpful to take note of repeated language. "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." That is at the beginning of the paragraph, too, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly from house to house." That's the main point of this paragraph. Paul did not shrink back from declaring the truth. And he is defending his ministry to them. He is saying, "I carried out what God called me to do." What else does he say about that ministry?

(1) I served with humility and with tears through trials.

- (2) I testified to repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (those are the two sides of the same coin that Peter also used in the conclusion of his sermons: repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ - repent and believe).
- (3) I preached the kingdom, declaring the whole purpose of God.

Why is Paul defending his ministry at the moment? Because the Holy Spirit is testifying to him “that bonds and afflictions await me.” He understands they will not see each other again. Then how does Paul process that idea?

²⁴ “But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

Paul is given over to the will of God. “If I don’t make it out of Jerusalem alive, then I don’t make it out of Jerusalem alive. But I’m going to be faithful to Jesus Christ.” The revelation that Paul will not see these elders again is key to understanding the tone of this speech. These leaders have close relationship with Paul. They served in ministry with him for two years, passing through exciting and scary times together. They love Paul. It is one thing to lift yourself up as a model, you know, to say, “I was humble among you and I wept for you,” to a crowd of people you do not know very well. That’s usually a mistake. You don’t want to be lifting yourself up to people you don’t know. It is very a different thing to ask a small band of men with whom you have close relationship to remember what you have taught them and what they saw in you. You can ask them to consider your tears and trials because they were there with you in those tears and trials. They know it’s not fake. They know this is not just rhetoric. They remember. And when you ask them, “What was my message? What has always been my message?” They know immediately without you needing to say it, “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified and raised from the dead.”

If Luke had not remembered these words and written them down, the speech would have just been for the elders. This is not for the whole congregation. It’s not for the broader church. Paul is not making a broad, public appeal. He is just speaking to the elders. And he has a word of warning specifically for them. The next paragraph is verses 28-31.

2 (28-31)

²⁸ “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ “Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

Again, the “therefore” gives us the logical conclusion of the paragraph. “Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” Paul impresses on these elders the seriousness of their responsibility to shepherd the church of God using his own behavior among them as an example. True Biblical theology regarding the Gospel of grace is a matter of life and death. It is worth tears. To escape eternal death, people must come to true faith in Jesus Christ. To experience the abundant life Jesus offers, people must learn to walk with Jesus in faith. And when people turn away from that, they are turning towards destruction. This was not just a job for Paul, clock in, clock out. It was not a task just to grow a bigger religious movement around him. It wasn’t all about his ego. It was a labor of love and concern for real people, and that brought him often to tears for them.

To love people, elders of a church must recognize that the spiritual battle of the mind is real and it’s critical. Leaders in Ephesus must refute for their congregation the priests of Artemis and the practitioners of magic who offer sensuality and power outside of God. They must also contend with the Jewish view of Scripture that denies Jesus Christ and calls believers to a legalistic approach of salvation. But those are not the wolves Paul speaks about here. Even more problematic than the

external challenges will be a packaging of such ideas as these together with Christian truths, that will then be promoted from within by professing believers. They will promote a distorted Gospel and they will lead disciples away from Biblical truth.

This will always be a challenge for every church. It was a primary theme way back in the book of Exodus. It really looked like the Egyptians were the problem. If we can just get out from under their yoke, we can live free. But then at Mount Sinai, we saw that a more sinister problem had entered the camp. The Israelites brought their own sin nature with them. Set free, they were still slaves. They tried to express their freedom by forming God into an image appropriate to their vision of what a powerful God should look like. But we cannot be free if we insist on defining truth ourselves. We can only be free by accepting God according to God's own definition of Himself, by accepting who we are based on how He defines us and accepting His way of salvation as the true way, His vision of life as the true vision.

The Church is a community of sinful people led by sinful people who are continually including sinful people into their community, whether by birth or through invitation. The vision is to grow together to be more and more like Jesus. But that is a lifelong process at which we will never fully arrive. So, we can never escape the need for communicating true Biblical faith. In Paul's mind, it is the job of the elders to seriously and faithfully take up the responsibility of shepherding the flock in right belief and right practice.

And this anticipation of Paul that wolves are going to enter the flock is a reality that he is writing about in his first letter to Timothy. This is going to come later, after Paul goes to Rome. Timothy is serving in Ephesus. And in that letter, he refers to contentious arguments about doctrine. He even names Hymenaeus and Alexander as men who have shipwrecked their faith. This is real. It's going to happen. Paul knows that.

Paul also writes in that letter to Timothy the qualifications necessary for elders. Those requirements fit with the need that Paul has spoken about here in this speech. The elder must be a person of moral integrity, must be able to get along with others, and must be able to teach the truths of the Christian faith. The importance of practical integrity comes out in Paul's last paragraph, this is verses 32-35.

3 (32-35)

³² "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. ³⁴ "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my *own* needs and to the men who were with me. ³⁵ "In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

Again, Paul is able to refer to his own practice as a model because these men were in close relationship with him. And they know whether he is speaking the truth or not. Also, these men have to take on the responsibility of leadership. So, when Paul presents himself as a model to them, he is also communicating to them that they must now be models for others. Orthodox faith must be shown to be real, not just through your teaching, but through your practice. And Paul's specific example has to do with his intentional effort not to be a financial burden on the believers in Ephesus and on the goal of saving money to help those who are less fortunate.

That connection of Gospel truth to financial reality has already been a theme in the Gospel of Acts. Luke brought that up in his record of the Jerusalem Awakening in the early chapters. Remember, he told us twice about believers selling goods to share with those in need, he told us about the hypocrisy of Ananias and Saphira, and he told us about the problem of distributing funds to Greek-speaking widows. So, there is quite a bit on this.

Paul returns to that theme in this speech. Here the exhortation is not to sell all you have. That one-time solution was appropriate to the revival context in Jerusalem after Pentecost. And select

believers will be led by God to sell goods or to sell land and give to the poor. Paul here exhorts a more sustainable solution for everyone to attempt. You know, all believers should try this. Work hard with the goal of making enough to provide for yourself and your family, so that hopefully you will have even more to share with those in need, and then share it. Paul will repeat that point later in Ephesians 4:28, “Labor...so that you will have something to share.” Everyone is not going to be able to succeed. Life can be rough and unfair. But that is, sort of, the point. Those who do succeed will be able to share with those who still have need.

And this concern for the physical needs of believers does not originate with Paul or with Luke. Paul quotes Jesus, “It is more blessed to give than receive.” That is a fine motto for the elder, both in physical things, and also in spiritual things.

Paul concludes with prayer. Verses 36-38.

Farewell (36-38)

³⁶ When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And they *began* to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, ³⁸ grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.

The elders do not act like chastised men after Paul’s challenge and warning. Paul said, “men will arise from your own selves, speaking perverse things.” You can think, “Wow! This is a contentious conversation!” I don’t think these men took it as though he was talking about them. And I am not sure when Paul says, “From among you,” whether he is talking about just this small group of leaders or whether he is talking about the congregation of all Ephesian. In any case, these men on the whole are committed to Paul personally. The warning does not throw them off. But the thought that they will not see Paul again, that does. And they weep and they embrace.

Paul’s main intention in speaking to the elders was to strengthen them for the difficult service of shepherding the church by exhorting them to hold true to Christian faith and practice as he had modeled for them. That is Paul’s intention. Luke’s intention for including this speech here is to provide a defense of Paul using his own words. Paul designed these words for a small, well-known audience. Luke saw the importance of sharing these words more broadly, as a way to affirm for us Paul’s behavior among the Ephesians. And it’s not just the words Paul uses, but the response. If you get up and you say these words, “You know how I have modeled myself to you,” and people don’t respond well, it’s not a very good defense. But the emotional response by the elders shows that they agree with what Paul is saying. He has made a relational impact on their lives. And his Gospel was very real to him. It was also very real to them, who had benefited from knowing him. He had led them into relationship with Jesus Christ.

Okay. So, having considered how this speech defends Paul and his Gospel, I have a few words about my secondary theme, the nature of the early Church. Verse 17 introduces the speech, “[Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.” I want to make a comment about the church and a comment about elders.

We have noted in more than one lesson that the simple meaning of “ekklesia” is assembly. Greek cities like Ephesus had assemblies. They were made up of free, landowning, male citizens who voted on important legislation for the city or on important decisions, like whether or not to go to war. That’s the job of the ekklesia.

The focus of the word is not on a building, it’s on a gathering of people. It is a free association of people who have come together for the good of the city. The town clerk in our previous lesson was the president of the Ephesian ekklesia. And he used that word when he warned the mob about making an unlawful ekklesia. The mob in the theater was that type of assembly.

Paul’s strategy has been to establish a new kind of assembly in every city he goes to. And this assembly cares about the well-being of the city, but not in direct competition with the political

assembly. This assembly is a spiritual assembly, caring for the spiritual and physical well-being of all the citizens. Luke sometimes makes a distinction by calling this assembly, the assembly of God. So that's a great name for a denomination, Assemblies of God. God's assembly is open to all, male and female, slave and free, rich and poor, citizen and foreigner. The only requirement for joining is faith in Jesus Christ, and the true president or chief elder of the assembly is Jesus.

This is how Paul saw the Church, as an assembly of people who have believed in Jesus Christ and represent the spiritual kingdom of God on earth. That *ekklesia* can refer to various levels of organization. On the most local level, we have an *ekklesia* that meets in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:5), on a little bigger level, we have the *ekklesia* of the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:1), so all the house assemblies in the city are the *ekklesia*. We can also refer to the assembly in a region, the *ekklesia* of Asia (1 Corinthians 16:19) or the *ekklesia* in Judea (Galatians 1:22). And we can refer to the *ekklesia* of all believers as Paul does in Ephesians 5:23, when he writes, "Christ is the head of the Church - the *ekklesia*." It's the word, "assembly." It can be very local or all the way up to being universal: all believers.

In Acts, we see Paul appointing elders at the city level. We do not know how formal the role of elder had become by this point, but there is some formality to it. It is a role in the church. These are not simply the respected old people in our midst, the elders. In Acts 14:23, we saw how Paul made it a part of his ministry strategy to appoint elders in each church that he planted. It is a recognized role of leadership in the early church. What is added in this passage is the reference to elders as overseers with the responsibility of shepherding.

The word "overseer" in Luke's Greek was, "*episkopos*," which is where the word "bishop" comes from. Paul recognizes no separate office of bishop. The elders here are all bishops or overseers. And that word had a broad meaning in the Greek. It's not a religious word. A person could oversee a ship, or a business, or a market, or a household. Paul adopts the word to emphasize the function of the elder to oversee the assembly of believers. He compares them to a shepherd overseeing a flock of sheep.

And though a shepherd may be seen as doing all the work for the sheep, you can get from the metaphor, Paul does not want you to get that. Elders aren't supposed to do all the work. When he writes the Ephesians, he directs those with leadership gifts to equip the saints, so that everyone can use their particular gifting for the building up of the church (Ephesians 4:11-12). Also, interestingly, we do not see one person given the role of pastor in the assemblies of Acts. The elders share this particular responsibility to guard and communicate the doctrinal and practical truths of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

Over the past two years Paul has equipped these men in Ephesus so that they might also equip others. Paul now exhorts them to remain true to Jesus Christ and he takes his leave.

We have seen the defense of Paul's ministry through the resurrection of the boy Eutychus and through his message to the Ephesian elders. In this last section, Paul's actions are defended as we see him following the sovereign voice of God.

I will keep this section brief. It divides into three parts: travel to Tyre, travel to Caesarea, and travel to Jerusalem. First, to Tyre, Acts 21:1-6.

Paul's ministry defended by God's sovereign leading (Acts 21:1-16)

Tyre (1-6)

¹ When we had parted from them and had set sail, we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara; ² and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. ³ When we came in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo. ⁴ After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem. ⁵ When our days there were ended, we left and started on our journey,

while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until *we were* out of the city. After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another. ⁶ Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again.

Patara is a city I am not familiar with. At the time, it was the Roman provincial headquarters for Lycia. So, it's not surprising Paul is able to find a ship there that left the coast and made the longer, direct voyage to Phoenicia. The Roman province Paul is sailing to is Syria. The older, regional name for the section of the coast that contains Tyre and Sidon is, Phoenicia. Luke made reference to Phoenicia back in chapter 11 when he told how the church in Antioch came to be. Jewish believers propelled out of Judea by the persecution that followed Stephen's martyrdom proclaimed the gospel up through Phoenicia, over to Cyprus, and into Antioch.

So, this church was planted before Paul came to faith in Christ. But Paul does not share fellowship only with the churches he planted. He is not creating his own denomination. He seeks out these believers in Tyre, they have that bond of faith in Jesus Christ. He spends a week with them. Paul hears the common voice of the Spirit through them. And they tell Paul, "Don't set foot in Jerusalem."

That brings up an interesting question. Paul hears the Spirit saying, "Go to Jerusalem." These believers, hearing the Spirit saying, "Do not go in Jerusalem." What's up with that? The easiest way to explain the apparent contradiction is to assume the believers in Tyre did not hear from the Spirit that Paul should not go to Jerusalem, but that if he goes, he will suffer. And then they added their own kind of application to that, "Do not go."

Believers can hear from the Spirit of God and derive very different conclusions on how to apply it. A cause of serious conflicts in churches can be the different directions believers want to take based on the urging of the Spirit, and especially when they have different gifts, so they have different priorities for what we ought to do. That's one reason we need elders, to make those difficult decisions for the community when there is not a clear, right response. The Spirit is working in all of us so what direction are we going to take? It does get hard when it is the elders are the ones that are disagreeing.

Here, there is disagreement about how to respond to the warning of the Spirit. But it is not the responsibility of the disciples in Tyre to make that call. Paul must decide. And he decides to continue on. Verses 7-14,

Caesarea (7-14)

⁷ When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day. ⁸ On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. ⁹ Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses. ¹⁰ As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" ¹² When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents *began* begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!"

We get an example here of what probably happened in Tyre. Agabus receives a word through the Holy Spirit that Paul will be bound by Jews and handed over to Gentiles. That prophecy in itself is not very clear. We might even note that Paul does not get bound by Jews. The prophesy comes true in a general sense, but maybe not in a specific sense.

With that lack of clarity, we can sympathize some with the believers in Caesarea who come up with the same application point as the believers in Tyre. “Paul, do not go to Jerusalem.” It’s not what the Holy Spirit said through Agabus. But it does seem like a pretty wise application point.

There is one quick point to make here about the early Church. I do not want to just skip over this. We have just read that Philip had four daughters who were gifted as prophetesses. And you may have noticed that I have referred to the Ephesian elders as “men.” That’s because God led Paul only to appoint men as elders. Paul taught Timothy the same principle in his letter referring to the qualifications of elders. Gender roles in leadership requires further study. I am not going to get into that here. We did notice at the beginning of the letter that Jesus only appointed men as apostles and that was a requirement for the replacement of Judas. That does not mean that Jesus did not value and respect the thinking abilities of women. He stood out as a Rabbi who taught and discussed theology with women like Mary and Martha.

Similarly, Paul limits the role of elders to men. But he does recognize the role of women prophesying and praying in the gathered assembly in 1 Corinthians 11. Here we have an affirmation that women were gifted by the Holy Spirit to communicate God’s Word through prophecy. A study on gender roles in the Church is going to require a study of all the key passages, starting back in Genesis 1 and 2, as Paul does. And also a study of the whole of Scripture to recognize important passages that might be easily overlooked, like this one here affirming female prophetesses. So, in the case of this issue, as Paul argued to the Ephesian elders, it is the job of the leadership of each church to study carefully the Word of God, so that Biblical truth might be rightly applied to our contemporary churches.

Okay, back to the prophecy that came from Agabus. Or I should say, back to the Caesareans’ interpretation of the prophecy, “Do not go to Jerusalem.” Paul counters that, pointing out a flaw in their interpretation and application. “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” This is not the exact same thing, but it does remind me of Peter telling Jesus not to go to the cross and Jesus looking at him and saying, “Get behind me, Satan! You are distracting me from the way I am going!” And that’s a little harsher and stronger because it was the Lord Jesus speaking and Peter should have trusted that. There is less clarity here. So, Paul is not rebuking them so strongly, but he is standing very firm on his understanding of the Holy Spirit’s message that suffering doesn’t mean I’m not supposed to go. Holding on to life is not the fundamental goal guiding my actions. Faithfulness to my ministry whether in blessing or in suffering, faithfulness to Jesus Christ, that is my fundamental goal of life. Jesus does not always choose to save believers from pain, or sickness, or failure, or death. That’s a poor theology of suffering. If we see pain ahead, we don’t always turn aside.

Now, should we seek out suffering for suffering’s sake? No. Should we avoid suffering at all costs? No. And it is hard to advise someone you love to continue on a path of guaranteed suffering. The believers in Caesarea do not do that. They urge Paul not to go. But the individual who is called by God is ultimately responsible to make that decision. Paul has the wisdom of an experienced servant of God. He does not proceed naively. When others had urged him not to enter the theater during the Ephesian riot, Paul had listened. His goal is not to throw his life away. This time, though, Paul does not accept the advice given him. He listens and he makes a different choice. He continues on. We end with verses 15-16.

Jerusalem (15-16)

¹⁵ After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge.

We have completed the first movement of Acts Part VI. Paul is in Jerusalem. The danger of the riot was avoided, the misconception promoted by Demetrius was corrected, and a defense has been

given. The defense comes by way of a miracle of resurrection, a speech to the Ephesian elders, and the sovereign voice of God.

This defense will not be enough to silence all critics. Some detractors will surely use Paul's long imprisonment and later transportation to Rome as a critique against his claim to serve God. Why then would God let all this happen? Why has God put you on the sideline and handed you over to pagans?

We will consider those events and continue to build our defense of Paul's character and actions. Ultimately, however, it comes down to this: sometimes suffering is God's plan. Consider Jesus, who was bound by the hands of sinful men and handed over for crucifixion. Keep your eyes fixed on Him. His vindication came from God. Paul's vindication comes from God. Our vindication comes from God. The rule of this life is to put your faith in Jesus Christ; to walk with Him the best you can; depending on the Spirit; using the gifts He has given you; working hard; sharing with those in need; living as a witness for His glory; confessing when you screw up; getting back up; accepting God's love and forgiveness; and continuing to walk with Jesus, wherever He leads.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 20:1-12. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. In what ways does the miracle of resurrection at Troas defend Paul as God's messenger?
3. Read Acts 20:13-38. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
4. The three-part division for Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders is left untitled in this lesson. What title would you give to each part of the speech?
5. Why is it important to recognize that this speech is specifically designed for the elders of the Ephesian house churches? How might this same speech come across differently if it was given to the whole congregation of a church?
6. Read Acts 21:1-16. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
7. In 19:21 we were told that "Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem." In 21:4 the disciples at Tyre, "Kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem." How do you resolve this apparent conflict?
8. How does 21:10-14 help you think about the apparent conflict of the Spirit giving one message to Paul and a contrary message to the disciples in Tyre? Do you have real life example of a similar seeming contradiction in your own life or between leaders you know?