

On the First Day of the Week

Acts 20:1-12

If anyone ever accuses the Bible of being boring, you might deprive them of their scorn by bringing them to this section of Acts.

If you think the Christian life is boring, go kick around with the Apostle Paul for a little while and change your mind.

The first words are: “After the uproar had ceased”, looking back at the exciting times of 19.

The next 12 verses are quite split down the middle.

In 6 verses, Luke has Paul resume the trip to Macedonia, travels through that region as well as into Achaia, side-steps a plot on his life, and returns to Troas where the Macedonian vision was first received.

And in these 6 verses, we are introduced to no less than 6 of his ministerial fellows.

These 6 verses cover about a 16 month period; the second 6 verses cover one day! The first day of the week we are in a meeting of the church that took them deep into the night. And 4 of those verses are about the sleepy young man, EJ – no, sorry, Eutychus!

As different as these two sections are, we will find them to be a double shot to our souls.

When we consider the faithfulness of Paul on the one hand, and the character of the Lord’s Day on the other, we have enough to humble

us, to lay low aside our arrogance, and to quicken our pace and practice.

Paul is making his way through those churches he planted in Macedonia, when he was on his way to Corinth.

But there is more than meets the eye.

It is possible that he made a trip north to Illyricum above Philippi and Thessalonica at this time.

Paul writes in Romans 15:

So that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ... (Rom 15:19)

FF Bruce's suggestion that this time here fits best is almost a certainty.

It is also at this time that the repentance and sorrow produced by his first letter to the Corinthians comes to him.

Paul's state of mind are reflected in in 2 places in 2 Corinthians – 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. (2Co 2:12-13)

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. ⁸ For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I*

did regret it-- for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while-- (2Co 7:5-8)

Another feature is the concern that Paul has at this time for collecting funds for the needy saints in Jerusalem.

2 Corinthians 8-9 ties into this purpose, which was fulfilled in both Macedonia and in Corinth.

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. ² On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come. ³ When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem...(1Co 16:1-3a)

One last item – while in Corinth, Paul made plans for further ministry westward, and it is in this time period that pens a letter called Romans.

What is the point of all this, then? Well, let us see how very fully Paul followed his Savior and Lord. How fully he fulfilled his responsibilities, and ran his race.

Here is Paul the **Missionary**, ploughing new ground in Illyricum and looking to Spain and perhaps beyond.

Here is Paul the **Apostle**, writing the book of Romans and 2 Corinthians.

Here is Paul the **Healer**, repairing the divisions in Corinth, and pouring the balm of Gilead into the wounds made by a friend.

Here is Paul the **Deacon**, gathering funds from these Gentile believers, to relieve the needs of the Jewish church in Jerusalem.

Here is Paul the **Churchman**, who was something of a seminary professor, who had a hand in raising up all these ministers listed here.

Look for a moment at this roster geographically:

1. From Macedonia, Sopater, also called Sospiter, a noble Berean; Aristarchus who was seized in the Ephesian riot; and Secundus, who is not mentioned anywhere else.
2. From Galatia – Gaius (pronounced guy-us) of Derbe, well known, also dragged into that riot; and Timothy, Paul’s son in the faith.
3. From Asia, the western province of Asia Minor. Tychicus, called by Paul a dear brother, faithful minister, fellow-servant in the Lord; and Trophimus, who he would leave sick much later in Miletus.

These men stand up in sharp contrast to the savage wolves Paul identified to the Ephesian elders later in the chapter.

The point is that here is Paul edifying, here is Paul serving, here is Paul evangelizing, here is Paul helping.

We could finish this list with Paul being persecuted, as the Jews plot against him. But in God’s providence, this leads him northward and over Macedonia while the rest make their way directly to Troas.

Here is the punch – follow Paul as he follows Christ; ‘be imitators of me,’ says Paul, ‘as I imitate Christ!’

Now that will look different for each of us.

Am I saying, be an Apostle, travel to Illyricum, write a book of the Bible, and perform miracles? Paul didn’t say that either!

But this will certainly look different from Christian to Christian.

You each run as only you each may run.

I am not telling a mother and house-keeper to leave her home, and run off to the mission field or neglect her love for her household in order to heal divisions in the church.

It may include working with and for your missionaries; it may include a timely word to heal; it may include assisting the deacons when they have a delicate need toward a woman or a widow.

And it will look different between young people and adults, and between able bodies and those who are declining in health and years.

But all are called to serve, to pray, to support the gospel endeavor, to sow as you would like to reap, to follow and exalt true Christianity, to pray and support apostolic Christianity; and to suffer persecutions, with joy, for the Lord's sake.

Be men and women, boys and girls of action!

There was an old Puritan by the name of Thomas Brooks.

Spurgeon collected a number of sayings from his many books, and called that volume, "Smooth Stones from Old Brooks."

Well here is one of those hard but good nuggets to hit us and wake us up.

He said: "Oh, then be ashamed, Christians, that worldlings are more studious and industrious to make sure of pebbles, than you are to make sure of pearls."

Your time, your life, your energies, your gifts, are the pearls – yet how many of us treat them like dirt – common, unimportant, and to be wasted.

Yet what time, energy and desire is spent by the unbeliever upon the pebbles of the world!

Where do you need to repent and beg God to change your ways, your walk, your worship, your service, to reflect the priorities and passions of eternity?

Keep that in mind as turn now to the second half – the second 6 verses.

Here we find ourselves gathered together for a church meeting.

Luke has told us the date in verse 6; if this is the year 57, we know the Feast of Unleavened bread fell between April 7-14.

Luke rejoins the group as he writes: “We”.

So here, on the first day of the week, all are gathered together to break bread – a picture of fellowship.

Paul intends to leave the next day, so a lengthened meeting is held, not stopping at midnight but into the morning hours of the next day.

It is here that we are introduced to a young man, Eutychus, who had a fall.

The main point of 8-12 is the great comfort that came from the miraculous restoration to life.

As so often in the book of Acts, a supernatural act dots the spread of the gospel.

Paul, as Elijah and Elisha in the OT, falls upon the lad's dead body, and by the power of the living Savior, brings him to life again.

What a picture of gospel preaching, right? The Word of God brings life! How wonderful to hear of coming from the deadness of sin to the life of faith, right?

But not here, as this chapter becomes an accusation against both long winded preachers and lazy, sleepy hearers!

A book was recently published on this chapter. The name of it is "Saving Eutychus."

On the back cover is written this sentence:

Poor Eutychus might have tumbled off his perch in Acts 20, but it is humbling to notice that what took Paul many hours of preaching to achieve—near-fatal napping in one of his listeners—takes most preachers only a few minutes on a Sunday!

Preaching needs to be biblical, timely, and fitted to the capacity of the hearers.

One of our OP ministers, Paul Viggiano, was saying to someone that he can tell when his congregation is staying with him; that when they aren't, he finishes things up more quickly, and when they are paying greater attention, he will carry on further. One of his elders sitting in then said, "so you punish us for faithful devotion?!"

It is work to hear a sermon, and sometimes it takes greater work than at others. The preacher should strive to make the message persuasive and engaging, and his voice should be fitted and trained to keep attention. But there must be work on your part.

You don't fall asleep in worship, do you?

If you were a part of the Qumran Community in Palestine in the 1st century, the penalty was banishment for 30 days.

Sadly, some church members would welcome that!

Or in some services in Puritan days, the ushers walked the aisles with a long stick, with a feather on the one end and a knot on the other. Dozing members got one warning – a tickle under the nose. And for male members, a knock on the head if nobody was home a second time!

But I don't preach too long, do I Christopher? Do I, Thomas?

You might be thinking – this is the second shot – but it isn't!

What I want your keenest attention for is the opening phrase, the title of our message, “on the first day of the week.”

This refers to the change of our worship day, from the last day of the week in the OT, to the first in the New.

The Lord gave the Sabbath day, not in the book of Leviticus, as a mere ceremony for the Jews, but in the book of Genesis, at the very outset of creation.

The command to keep one day in seven is found in the Ten Commandments.

The first day of the week is the New Day for the New Covenant.

It was ushered in by the finished work of our humble Savior, on the day He smashed the bands of death for an innumerable host.

The sign of the covenant in Exodus 31 and elsewhere, given with such holy solemnity, is not set aside.

Hebrews 4 says unmistakably that there is a Sabbath keeping for the people of God, as long as we have not yet entered our eternal rest.

The same book says we must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some.

We find 1 Cor. 16 instructing us to gather on the first day of the week.

And John is to be imitated, in that he was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day in Rev. 1:10.

Many reject this, saying that this is done away with in Christ.

Where did He do so? How and when is this set aside?

Listen to good old Matthew Henry's Scripture Catechism:

“Was the Sabbath to continue in Gospel times? Yes, for there remains a keeping of the Sabbath to the people of God, Heb 4.9; did Christ intend it should continue? Yes, for he said pray that your flight be not on the Sabbath day, Matthew 24:20. Did he in order to that expound the 4th commandment? Yes, He showed that it is lawful to do well upon the Sabbath Day. [Why does He instruct us to do well on the Sabbath Day if He comes to do away with it?] Is there the same need of the Sabbaths now that ever there was? Yes, for as Ezekiel 20:12 says, ‘I gave them My Sabbaths that they might know that I am the Lord. [This is how we grow in knowing the Lord.] 227, 3-4.

Indeed, we would say with the book of Colossians that the ceremonial Sabbaths, the high feasts and new moons are fulfilled in Christ, and

done away with by Christ. And we are in fact called upon to not make man-made religious holidays.

But not this Commandment written on stone for permanence, and on our hearts by the Spirit if we are follow the word of God.

Here is a passage that not only recommends the Lord's Day, but the whole day, with an evening service.

Perhaps the fact that many were slaves meant they had to work on that day, but they found time to worship still.

How then should this day be marked by you and me?

Here is the other barrel – which is life-giving.

Let us see **first** of all that it is God's new day. It is resurrection Day. Every Sunday is Easter. Every Sunday is about Jesus Christ being our Mediator, His being exalted; it is the day of new life, the day of the new covenant, the day of the new world, the day of the eternal world that is to come. This day has a future orientation, as Jesus the forerunner has entered into what you and I will have in due time. Jesus is our eternal rest. We are longing for the day when the new heavens and new earth come. We saw earlier from Revelation 1 that it is a day of the Spirit; a day when we as living stones of the temple are to be filled together as His people. How we need that!

2ndly, it is a day of teaching, of preaching, of growth in the Word, of sitting under apostolic instruction; unlike poor Eutychus who fell asleep, probably because of the lamps filling that place with smoke, which is why he may be sitting next to a window for fresh air. Our places of worship need good ventilation. But more than that our souls

need the fresh breezes of the Scriptures. How many believers are there today who complain: “I am not growing! I am cold and slow and sleepy in my devotion! I know I should be a better Christian – and want to be in my heart – but I am not!” Are you keeping one day in 7? The Lord’s Day? This is the time to be carved out – not, I say, by your hand, but by God’s own hand – commanding you as well as inviting you – come, learn of me, take my yoke upon you, spend time with your God!

3rdly, it is a day of fellowship. I take the phrase here “to break bread” to mean fellowship. Now many have mistakenly take this phrase to mean the Lord’s supper, and some even go so far as to say we should have the sacrament every time we come together, every Sunday. But do a careful study of this phrase, and you will find it does not mean the sacrament, but the idea of having fellowship as Christians. This may include the supper, as in 1 Corinthians speaks of agape meals which included communion. But think of one example, at the end of Luke’s gospel – when those two disciples on the road to Emmaus are joined by their risen and unrecognized Lord; do you think that when he at last broke bread and gave thanks and they recognized him, that they were partaking in the Lord’s supper and didn’t know it? Hardly! Or how about in Acts 27, when after the shipwreck, Paul breaks bread with all the prisoners? Breaking bread means fellowship, means hospitality, means having time with God’s people. This is our day! A day of time with God’s people! This is when especially we have time with one another to encourage each other, pray for one another, growing in our closeness to one another. How sad it is to see believers, after worship, making as quick an exit as they can away from this means of grace! Fellowship is the mark of this day. We could add the

words of 1 Cor. 16 in taking up offerings for the poor – this is a day of ministry, of outreach, of care for those who are struggling, who are lonely, and who are in need of our help.

Lastly, it is of course a day of worship; of gathering together, decently and in order, as 1 Cor. 14 outlines; to be led by those who are spiritually and authoritatively called servants – who are the gifts to us of the risen Lord to us. Listen to the wonderful words of Psalm 84 – how can such lines not still be ringing in our hearts today?

How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! ² My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. (Psa 84:1-2 NKJ)

We should desire and long to gather to together, to come to church, to come before the Lord, for this Day of Days, this day of rest.

¹⁰ For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness. (Psa 84:10 NKJ)

What needs to change in your life to make this so? The Christian Sabbath, the Lord's Day indeed? To make it a day of Jesus, the risen Jesus; of being in the word and growing; a day of fellowship with God's saint, with whom you will dwell forever; a day of serving others; a day of worship and devotion? Where are you deficient? Where do you need to grow?

I want to quote the fine lines of a past and better day that appreciated the benefits of this day better than we. The Scotsman John Eadie said:

Christians can never value the Sabbath too highly. It is a precious boon to the church and a blessed gift to a weary and sin-laden world.

It points us back to the bowers of Eden which we have forfeited, and bids us not despair, for it is a pledge and foretaste of a nobler inheritance in a better country, where there is an everlasting Sabbath. How welcome to the saint when pressed with six days care and noise and toil is a returning day of rest that hides him from the world awhile.

Refreshing day this should be, and I pray God would indeed make it so to your souls. Amen.