

O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

Wake Up! (Acts 19:21-20:38)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 19, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ Every preacher who's honest with himself knows that every Sunday morning he successfully puts to sleep a percentage of his congregation. And all you can hope for is to steadily decrease that percentage as you continue to hone your craft. But it's inevitable. People are going to fall asleep. We know when it happens. We can see it from this vantage point!
 - ▶ But it brings no little comfort to know that it happens even to the best of preachers. Even to the Apostle Paul. This little story in the middle of Acts 20 where Eutychus passes out during Paul's preaching (and falls out a third-story window) offers a bit of lighthearted humor (since it ends well). And it's been used to argue that longwinded guys like me need to preach shorter sermons. I plan to prove today that I can!

- ❖ But as I was trying to figure out how to preach this entire section of Acts, which contains three units that seemingly have little connection with each other – a) the riot at Ephesus, b) the raising of Eutychus, and c) Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian elders – and I realized that this incident of falling asleep to the Word of God – of falling into a stupor, into a spiritual state of slumber – really does connect all three units.
 - ▶ **In Scripture we're told that we have three enemies of the soul, three sources of temptation: the world, the flesh, and the devil (cf. Eph. 2:1-3).** And we're commanded throughout the New Testament to be on alert, to be watchful of these three tempters. To wake up and recognize the spiritual danger they pose.

- ❖ So that's the connection between these three seemingly unconnected units. What we're supposed to get out of **the riot at Ephesus** is a warning to be alert to the idolatrous potentiality of the world. That story is all about idolatry and how anything in this world can become an idol, something you need so badly that you might even kill for. Wake up to that reality!
 - ▶ And in **the Eutychus story**, we're reminded of how the spirit may be willing but the flesh is weak, and how we can often be our worst enemy. We can't ignore our flesh.
 - And in **Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders** we see the urgent need to be on alert for falsehood and purveyors of falsehood, who we know are influenced by forces much more diabolical. **So this theme of staying awake, staying alert, definitely runs through each unit.** So let's consider them one at a time.

Be Alert to the Idolatrous Potentiality of the World

- ❖ Let's begin in chapter 19:21 and this incident in Ephesus. Here we're warned to be alert to the idolatrous potentiality of the world. **Now to understand how this riot got started, you have to keep in mind how much Paul's ministry in Ephesus was impacting Ephesian society.**
 - ▶ We're told that he spent up to three years in the city preaching and teaching daily (19:9). It led to conversion after conversion, and we're told in chapter 19:18 that many former practitioners of magic were renouncing their dark arts and burning their books. *"So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily."* (19:20)

- ❖ It's interesting how Luke describes the gospel as not just increasing (which he does in 6:7 or 12:24) but as prevailing mightily. The Greek word for “*prevail*” is the same used in chapter 19:16 to describe the evil spirit overpowering (or prevailing over) the seven sons of Sceva.
 - ▶ So the gospel is not just spreading through Ephesus. **The gospel is overpowering and prevailing over someone or something.** And as we go into v23, we're told that the someone or something are the city's idols.
 - Luke records this riot instigated by silversmiths whose industry was tied up with the cultic worship of Artemis, the city's patron goddess. **His point is to show us that the gospel in Paul's day was challenging the very social order.** It was confronting the idols at the heart of society and prevailing. Now when that happens, there's inevitable pushback.

- ❖ Read v23, “*About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way.*” The Way is what they called Christianity before it was called Christianity (cf. Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). It likely stemmed from Jesus's claim to be the Way to God the Father (Jn. 14:6).
 - ▶ **Now if Christianity were simply known as “a way”, then there wouldn't have been much of a disturbance.** It's only because Christianity insisted that its The Way. That's going to offend whether you're claiming that in our society or in 1st-century Greco-Roman society. Because both societies are pluralistic and welcoming of a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses. So to narrow it down to just one Way is upsetting.
 - We don't like to hear that. **We get offended by someone else's claim to know the way.** My wife can tell you that I never ask for directions because I like to believe I always know the way. To have someone tell me I'm lost – that I don't know the way but they do – is infuriating. It's upsetting.

- ❖ So here's Paul, a member of the Way, preaching and lecturing daily about the Way to God. He says it's not found in magic arts. It's not in these pagan temples and shrines. **The Way to God is this man Christ Jesus alone.** Now that kind of message is going to ruffle some feathers.
 - ▶ One man in particular takes great offense. His name is **Demetrius** a silversmith, probably the master of the silversmith guild, so he feels responsible to take action to deal with this threat to their industry and way of life.

- ❖ Ephesus was home to the **Temple of Artemis**, which was the largest building in the Greek world. It was one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. So Artemis was widely revered and worshipped, and the silversmiths profited off making little replica shrines and statuettes.
 - ▶ But just as many citizens were throwing their old magic books into the bonfires, you can imagine many former worshippers of Artemis doing the same with their silver shrines and statues. So Demetrius calls an emergency meeting of his colleagues.

- ❖ Look at what he says to them in v25, “*Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth.* ²⁶*And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.* ²⁷*And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also*

that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.”

- ❖ Paul’s critics understood the main thrust of his message. That gods made with hands are not gods. They’re worthless idols. There’s only one true God and his name is Jesus. **Of course Demetrius takes offense, but notice how he tries to couch his concerns with talk of protecting the glory of Artemis.** She, along with her temple, may be deposed and discredited. For her namesake, we can’t let that happen!
 - ▶ But notice how his concern is really for his business’s sake. For his profit’s sake. Demetrius knows how to say the right words and give the proper reverence to Artemis, but as you can clearly see – his functional god, his idol, is really his wealth. **He worships Artemis on one level, but ultimately as a means to worship and serve his wealth.** There’s always an idol under the idol.
 - And who knows? Under the idol of wealth was probably another. Maybe Demetrius’s wealth was there to serve a deeper heart idol like his need for approval, power, security, or comfort, etc. Then that would really be his god.

- ❖ **What this means is that anything in the world can be an idol (functional god).** This is why we have to stay alert. To wake up to the reality that idols are everywhere. **Anything can be an idol when you begin to look to it to satisfy you and give to you what only God can.**
 - ▶ We’ve touch on this subject enough for you to recognize by now that many good things in life can turn into idols when we elevate them to god-like status. Where our career, wealth, relationships, marriage, or children become our very source of purpose and identity. Our very meaning to live. As we’ve said before, that’s when a career becomes Hermes the god of commerce. That’s when a spouse becomes Hera the goddess of marriage. Most of us are alert to how these good things have potentiality to be idols.

- ❖ **But what we see here in the reaction of Demetrius and his colleagues is that even religion can be an idol.** *Have you ever thought about that?* You could be worshipping God on the outside, but really only as means to serve the other god who rules your heart. So you believe the right things. You do the right things. You live the right way. You show up to worship.
 - ▶ **But you do all these things – not because you want God – but because you want something from God.** You want some material blessing from him. Some answer to prayer. You want his power on your side to accomplish your ends. You want the gifts but not so much the Giver. That’s how even your religion can become your idol.

- ❖ In Tim Keller’s book *The Prodigal God*, he recounts this story he attributes to Charles Spurgeon¹. A story about this gardener who grew a giant carrot and brought it to the royal court to present to the king. He said, “My lord, this is the greatest carrot I’ve ever grown and I want to present it to you as a token of my love and allegiance.” The king was touched and gifted the gardener with a plot of his royal land to tend. The man left the court humbled and rejoicing.

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Dutton (2008), 60-61.

- ❖ Now there was a nobleman who overheard this conversation, and he said to himself, “Wow, all that for just a carrot? Imagine if I brought something better.” So the next day he arrives at court with a handsome black stallion, and he says to the king, “My lord, this is the greatest horse I’ve ever bred and I want to present it to you as a token of my love and allegiance.”
 - ▶ But the king discerned his heart, took the horse, and merely dismissed him. As he was walking away befuddled, the king spoke up and explained, “You see, that gardener gave *me* the carrot. But you, sir, were giving *yourself* the horse.”

- ❖ That’s what goes on when your religion is an idol. **You give God your obedience and devotion, but you’re really giving it to yourself.** You’re serving yourself. You’re serving some other god that rules your heart. Do see just how dangerous idolatry can be? Anything in this world has the potentiality to be an idol. Even religion.
 - ▶ *So what are we to do about it? First, we need someone like Paul. We need someone willing to risk incurring the wrath of the culture. Because when you confronts its idols to expose their weaknesses that's what you can expect.* Notice how in v30 Paul wants to go into the unruly, angry crowd but his friends keep him back. We need more Pauls with that kind of fortitude. But in reality every Christian has this task. To be like Paul and cause no little disturbance in our own community, in our own city, by exposing idols, by showing how they can't satisfy and keep their promises.

- ❖ But to really serve our city, our culture, what we need to point them to Jesus. **Paul was willing to risk his life to save the Ephesians from idolatry. Jesus actually lost his life to save us from idolatry.** He willingly walked into an angry mob and put his life in their hands. And they nailed him to a tree. What he did was to die in the place of sinners like you and me. He came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.
 - ▶ No idol can do the same. Your career might be fulfilling but it may demand *you* to serve it and give up *your* life for it. Your significant other may be gracious to forgive your sins, but they can’t atone for them. They’ll never die for them. Only Jesus does that.
 - When you recognize that, when you believe that, when you rejoice in that. **When Jesus becomes your source of purpose and identity, your meaning to live, then a career is just a career and no longer Hermes.** Marriage is just marriage and no longer Hera. And religion is exactly what it should be – all about God and his glory and not about me and mine.

Be Alert to the Weakness of the Flesh

- ❖ So this first unit about the riot at Ephesus alerts us to how the world and everything in it has the potential to be an idol in our lives. Now let’s briefly consider this story of Eutychus, and let me show you how it’s here to alert us concerning our second enemy, the flesh.
 - ▶ In chapter 20:7, Paul and company are in Troas. It’s the first day of the week (Sunday) and the church is gathered together to break bread, that is, to take communion (This btw is good reason for us to keep up the practice). Now it’s likely their meeting began at sunset when it was cooler. We’re told they were in a third-story room with many lamps.

- ❖ So just imagine how hot and stuffy it must have been. Eutychus was sitting by a window trying to take in the occasional breeze. But as Paul's sermon continued on towards midnight, the young man was overcome by sleep and he fell out the window to his death.
- ❖ The language of being "taken up dead" suggests that he actually died. Remember Luke is a physician, so he knows the difference between dead and unconscious. The boy did die. But then God works a miracle through Paul.
 - ▶ Paul races down and it says he bent over Eutychus, but literally Luke describes him as stretching over the young man. Just like in the story of **Elijah** when he raised the dead son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kg. 17:19) or when **Elisha** did the same for the son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kg. 4:32-33).
 - So this incident falls within an established biblical pattern of God using human agents to do mighty works, to even raise the dead. To give new life.
- ❖ But this is my point. **I think this story can function as a parable of our fleshly weakness, of the way in which the Word of God in our lives often falls on deaf ears.** What happened to Eutychus was that he got tired and fell asleep. Luke doesn't place any moral blame on him. And neither would I. The fact is all of us have, at some point, fallen asleep in a sermon or when we read the Bible. That happens.
 - ▶ My concern is not that it happens. My concern is when we don't realize *why* it's happening. Why are you not getting anything out of your Bible reading? Why does Scripture not move you or convict you or bring you comfort or joy. What's going on?
- ❖ **I'm concerned when we think the problem is we've just fallen into a rut.** We need to change up our routine. Pick up a new devotional. Maybe take a new class or join a new bible study. But we're completely ignoring the weakness of our flesh. The problem is in us. It's usually not in the quality of the bible study or the preaching or the devotional. It's definitely not in the quality of the Bible itself.
 - ▶ **The problem is that your flesh has lulled you into spiritual slumber.** The solution is not to read a new book. The solution is to preach to yourself the old, old story. The story of God's great love for you, in treating you better than your sins deserve, in sending his Son to die for those sins, to give you hope and new life.
 - Cry out to God and ask him to renew a right spirit within you. To awaken your soul so you respond to the Word of God like the psalmist who sang, "*Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.*" (Ps. 119:97) "*How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*" (119:103) "*Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart.*" (119:111)

Be Alert to the Falsehood Instigated by the Devil

- ❖ So be alert to the world, to the flesh, and lastly to the devil. In Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders on the beaches of Miletus, he warns us to be alert to the falsehood of false teachers being instigated by the Devil himself. I say that because 1 John 4 says that every false teacher that has gone out into the world is influenced by a false spirit, the spirit of the antichrist, the devil.

- ❖ Here in chapter 20:17 Paul's headed to Jerusalem and doesn't want to be delayed by a layover in Ephesus, but he still want to address the elders of the Ephesian church. That doesn't mean he wants to speak to the senior fellowship, to the elderly in the church. **Elder** (*presbyteros*) refers to a specific office in the church. Elders are the senior leaders but they're not necessarily senior citizens. **The term just emphasizes the spiritual maturity of the man in that office.**
 - ▶ Elders are also called overseers (*episkopos*) in the NT. You see that in v28 where Paul tells the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit “*has made you overseers.*” (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1) **Overseer emphasizes the governing authority invested in that office.** An elder is someone who not only models spiritual maturity for the flock but has been given authority and responsibility to oversee the flock.

- ❖ Then there's the term pastor (*poimen*). The one were familiar with. We may not know what an elder or overseer is or what they do in the church. But we all know who a pastor is and what he's supposed to do. But interestingly, pastor is used as a title in only one place in all of Scripture (cf. Eph. 4:11). It's usually in the verb form as in “to pastor or to shepherd”.
 - ▶ You see it in v28. “*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*” That phrase “to care for” is literally “to shepherd”. Ephesian elders, the Holy Spirit made you overseers responsible for pastoring the blood-bought flock of God.
 - **So an elder is an overseer, who is a pastor.** They're all synonymous terms that highlight different accepts of the one and same role. So when we use the term “pastor” we're emphasizing the *kind* of authority that elders are to exercise. It's to be a tender, compassionate authority like you'd expect from a good shepherd.

- ❖ Think about this. **If you're a member of a church, your elders / pastors have authority of you.** I know we immediately chafe at that. We don't like being under authority. But for the Bible to describe them as shepherds implies they do have authority over you.
 - ▶ Shepherds don't turn to their sheep and ask, “So where you do guys want to graze today? I'll follow you.” No, they lead. They exercise proper authority. But there's a reason why they're called pastors and not ranchers or generals. Their job is to care for the sheep. Not to order them around or to fatten them up for slaughter. Pastors / elders are leaders of the church responsible for feeding, nurturing, and protecting the sheep.

- ❖ This is Paul's main point in his speech. **He charges the Ephesian elders to stay alert and keep watch over themselves and their flock.** Keep an eye on your own relationship with God and then do the same for your members. **Because there are fierce wolves out there – even some in sheep's clothing – who will use false teaching to draw sheep away from the gospel and away from the fold.** Only to figuratively devour them leaving their soul in jeopardy.
 - ▶ Paul begins this charge to the elders with a personal reflection of his own ministry among them for three years (20:31). He asks them to recall the example he set as one who faithfully shepherded the flock. He reminds them in v19 of how he served the Lord “*with all humility and with tears and with trials.*”

- ❖ He was relentless in his preaching and teaching. He reminded them how he constantly taught in public and in private from house to house (20:20). How he didn't shrink back from teaching anything that was profitable. He didn't shrink back from declaring the whole counsel of God (20:27). Again, he was willing to incur the anger of others who are offended by God's word.
 - ▶ **The fact is that biblical truth will offend everyone at some point.** If you're committed to teaching the whole counsel of God, then I can guarantee that something taught in Scripture will inevitably offend your neighbor, your colleague, yourself even!

- ❖ The Bible teaches things that our culture, our city, is going to consider downright offensive. But that's to be expected. When your friend says to you, "*I can't accept Christianity. I can't believe the Bible because it teaches this or that which I find offensive.*", that's when you need to say to him/her, "*I get it. You're offended by the Word of God. But what did you expect?*"
 - ▶ If this book is truly the Word of God himself, did you expect to instinctively agree with everything in it? Are you assuming that if there really is a God who wrote a book, that he wouldn't hold to or promote any views that might upset you?
 - **Would that be the true God of creation or just a God of your own making – a God made in your own image who agrees with your modern sensibilities?** Only if you come across a God who can say things that potentially upset you, only then do you know you've gotten hold of a real God and not just a figment of your imagination.

- ❖ **This is why we, as a church, must not shrink back from speaking the whole counsel of God, everything taught in Scripture.** Wolves will creep in and try to remove all offense in the Bible. They'll offer you a portrait of God that perfectly agrees with you and your opinions. But look close enough at this god and you'll realize that you're really just staring in the mirror.
 - ▶ **Your pastors, your elders, have a most important duty to not just teach the church good doctrine but to guard her from bad doctrine.** For this reason, pray for your pastors /elders. Pray for the Spirit to raise up more shepherds that have the theological senses and the spiritual guts to propagate and defend the gospel and sound doctrine.
 - And as sheep, it's your duty to stay awake and be alert. Because there certainly are dangers out there in the world, in our flesh, and in the devil.