

4/14/24 - Acts 20:1-16 - "The Central Focus of Ministry"

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[0 : 00] We will be reading today from Acts chapter 20, starting in verse 1 through verse 16. It's on page 929 of the Pew Bible.

After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia. When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece.

There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews, as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. So Peter, the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him, and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus, and Gaius of Derb, and Timothy, and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus.

These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas. But we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days.

On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.

[1 : 25] There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered, and a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer.

And being overwhelmed by sleep, he fell down from the third story, and was taken up dead. But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.

And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them as a long while, until daybreak and so departed. And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted.

But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Asos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land.

And when he met us at Asos, we took him on board and went to Mytilene. And sailing from there, we came the following day, opposite Chios. The next day we touched at Samos, and the day after that we went to Miletus.

[2 : 31] For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia. For he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. It's great to be here again. We made another week.

The sun is not going to be out forever. And we will hopefully not be lasting as long as that message that we just read in that upper room. And so you can get your lawn work done, or your Bob Evans reservations can be made.

But it's great to be gathered, and I think one of the things that this text really highlights is that ministry can be full of challenges.

It can be very, very challenging. Paul has certainly faced that issue in the cycle of rejection and reception. He'd go to this city, preach in the gospel, and find people mad at him.

[3 : 33] I wonder why. You know? It's just a cycle. It's challenging. He's seen the joyous occasions of spiritual awakening and revival and the darkness of spiritual dejection.

Ministry is full of challenges. There's no other way around it. It's challenging. Last year, a poll was taken up for the top 10 ministry challenges.

For non-growing churches, churches that are kind of just stagnant or on the decline, they found the challenges relating to attractiveness of programs, retaining young adults, youth programs, small group participation, and effective strategy.

But the challenges for churches that are growing was overwhelming conflict. Conflict. That's it.

And now, what if seeing these ministry challenges, seeing the nature of ministry being challenging in Paul's life, looking at even our day-to-day of the challenges that we face, whether they're petty or significant, what if all of these challenges were not viewed in such a negative light, but in a sanctifying light, especially if God is in the driver's seat amid the ministry?

[5 : 05] Right? What if we could view these challenges from not such a negative light? In other words, what if there is no other way around challenges in ministry that, welcome to ministry, it's like the place is burning down.

Get on board. There's more to do. Right? What if that is ministry? And God is simply calling us to keep our eyes on His plans as He guides us along, we'll say, the burning path.

Right? Today, we join Paul in a series of visits to regions all over the European area of the world.

And the passage will reinforce one point to us, for us not to become distracted from God's work. Don't be distracted.

Become distracted from God's work. And as we join Paul, we sit with him on this journey. It's quite an event full of twists and turns.

[6 : 12] And I would argue that his challenges are far greater than any of our challenges today. You know, programs and conflict and things of that nature.

His can supersede that. And I think in that we get a perspective. That if things are hard and we're going to make it, and we look at Paul and things were hard and he made it, that gives us good perspective that it's okay to be in challenging situations.

And so let's see what that looks like in a sermon titled, The Essential Focus of Ministry. The Essential Focus of Ministry. And we'll have two points today.

Or two sections, whatever you want to call it. There's going to be, I'm going to break it up in two different chunks. We'll call it that. And let's turn to the Lord in prayer because this task of preaching the word is of no insignificance.

This is central to our lives. Let's pray. Father, thank you for gathering us here today, for calling us out of bed, for waking us up.

[7 : 21] We certainly do have a praise this morning. As we all awoke from bed. And Father, as some of us were dragged out of bed, we are here.

And as we are here, keep our hearts attentive to your word and your leading and your guidance and encouragement here at this church. And help us to see the essentials of ministry.

What is central in your work. We praise in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So for the first section, as promised, the first section is the central focus of the mission.

So the object here is the mission. What is the central focus of the mission? And we're going to look at what's going on in these verses and a lot of movement.

Your attention is going to actually be onto the projector in just a moment. I'm going to throw the media people for a tizzy because I don't know what this is going to look like on the live stream. But let's look at verse 6, 1 through 6, and 13 through 16.

[8 : 29] I call that the top of the passage and the tail of the passage, the beginning and the end. Because what a journey for Paul in these 20 verses as a whole. This was documented between 20 verses.

It's over 1,000 miles of traveling for Paul. And not even a year's time. Within just 20 verses. This is pretty crazy. And we enter the playing field.

We're taken from like a spectator perspective. And we're joined alongside Paul on this journey. And we're going through western Turkey, up around the Aegean Sea, and through Macedonia and down to Greece.

And let's lay out what we see with Paul. And so we see this map. This is the Mediterranean area. The red line, if you can see it, is his journey.

And so this is, I want to really reinforce the historicity of this passage. I think that that's important within God's word. And that these are real events and real time frames in life.

[9 : 38] And so he starts out here in Ephesus in verse 1. And then look. Luke didn't really detail all the things that were going on into verse 2.

But we get to verse 2 over here. One, about 400 miles up and around the Aegean Sea. And then to verse 2.

All along the way from Macedonia to Greece. He ran into a little bit of trouble down in this area. Looking to book his ship home. It looked like there was another death threat upon his life.

You know, everyone's always trying to get Paul. And so they made an effort to do that. But failed because Paul, sneaky one. He goes up and back around. And you see that number 6 in verse 6.

He gets to Macedonia to Troas. And there's a big break in the passage. And then it picks back up in verse 13. Troas to Asos.

[10 : 41] And then verse 14. Right next to that. Asos to Mytilene. And then verse 15.

Mytilene to Meletus. And then he has his sights all the way down to Jerusalem. Now what I want...

The point of seeing all of this is to see that this was a very long journey in a short amount of time. And what was it all along?

Ministry. It was ministry. This was God's work. Where'd it go? All right. There. It's gone. Voila. It was ministry work.

Touching my slides. Oh, there's section 2. What we can see immediately based upon Luke's structure of this passage is that ministry is busy. It's challenging.

[11 : 43] Ministry is sometimes a dumpster fire. We want to get real, right? This is ministry. It's exhausting going all around these regions. It's trying upon our faith of like, God, are you going to help us get through this?

Another threat on my life, Lord? Come on. All I want to do is go to the Passover. Is that too much to ask? Well, I guess I'll go back up and around. How many of us today might be able to feel the weight of that sentiment?

That ministry is busy. Ministry is exhausting. Ministry challenges us. Personally, as a pastor, this isn't all about me. Pastoral ministry all over, across the globe.

The quitting rate is like 80%. Don't make it. Right? It weighs on me constantly. It affects me. The weight and the physical turmoil.

The mental turmoil. It affects our family. My family here. It affects everything in my life that my life touches. There's no other way around it.

[12 : 54] How did Paul keep on keeping on, we'll say? How did he keep pressing on? What presses every pastor to keep on keeping on?

Well, the answer is simple. The people God has called us to equip and reach with the gospel. God has given us a job description.

As church members, as Christians, you're given a job description. God called you not to just be participants, but be active roles within his mission and his ministry.

And if you don't like challenges, you better beware. It's going to be hard. Right? And the mission is twofold. The mission is twofold.

From region to region, he's not necessarily trying to build his ministry team, although he was in every city. We see some names there, but I'll get to that in a second.

[13 : 59] But that wasn't his sole focus of building his ministry team. But he was recruiting people into the family of God to join God in his work, just as each and every one of us is part of that ministry work, that challenging ministry work.

The people of God were central to the mission in calling them to faith and also sending them out to the mission. And people are everything in this passage.

Luke makes that clear in some repetitive phrases at the beginning. Look in verse one. We see that in Ephesus, what did Paul do? After encouraging them, he said farewell and departed.

In all the chaos, let's remember that. What did he do in Ephesus? After encouraging them, he said farewell and departed. Look what he did in the regions of Macedonia in verse two.

He had given them much encouragement. The people focus is central. In verse two, it's also mentioned that he spent three months in Greece.

[15 : 07] He liked Greece. I imagine encouraging them as well. People work. And not only that, Luke mentions by name his ministry partners and co-laborers who track the busy, exhausting, challenging nature of ministry and the mission.

And they stick by his side through the challenges. These are Paul's companions. The ones that God has given to him to fight that battle. Ministry is not a solo endeavor.

It's a team endeavor. And in fact, by mentioning their hometowns, these seven men are a testimony of Paul's obedience to the job description given by God.

It is a testimony of God's work that is directly correlated to Acts 1.8 and the spread of the gospel that began like an atom bomb in Jerusalem and spread throughout the region.

So what is ministry like? Busy. It's exhausting. It's challenging. But even amid the struggles and the unknowns, the central focus of the mission has always been people.

[16 : 25] The central focus of the mission has always been people. Most of all, he never lost sight of community.

Look at the detail that Luke includes in here. We ought to ask, like, why is he detailing this? I'm interested in all the other journey that got from verse 1 to verse 2 and a trek of 400 miles.

Luke records here that he stopped all the ministry endeavor, all the travel plans, Why? On account of the days of unleavened bread.

It's a time frame of community among the people of God to rest with the people of God amid the chaos. Right? Everything paused for the emphasis to focus on the people of God.

There's a great lesson and a reminder that these travel plans have for us. Paul never lost sight of God's people and how easy it is to get caught up in doing ministry and forget what ministry is all about.

[17 : 32] Right? Very easy. Very easy. I mean, we can't forget the central message of the gospel. We can't forget that Jesus Christ has come to restore his kingdom.

kingdom. Right? But what is a kingdom without people for Jesus to reign over? No people, no kingdom.

And that is what we see here. Through the work of Jesus Christ, it's emphasized through the substitutionary atonement and the death of Jesus Christ on the cross where our sins were laid upon his lifeless body and died and was buried but rose again.

Death could not hold him. The grave could not keep him. Amen? The gospel, by our faith in his work, we are brought into that kingdom.

And guess what? There are people not only within our scope, within a building or a gathering, but there are people outside the kingdom to reach as well.

[18 : 44] focus on the central components of the mission. Again, the central focus of the mission is the people of God.

And we see the second section unfolding and we get another central focus, central focus of God's people. So we got the mission.

Now let's zoom in a little bit and kind of examine the people now for their focus, right? You could say, like, well, the mission you just said, but it goes a little bit deeper than that because in the big chunk of this passage from verse 1 to verse 20, Luke decides to make a detailed account, like, strangely detailed account, between verse 7 and 12.

And we got to say, like, what's up with that, Luke? He's the author. If you're wondering who Luke is, he's the author of the book of Acts, as I believe, and I believe that I'm among many friends that believe the same.

We could debate that at house churches this week. But the chunk of the passage kind of stops here, digs deeper into the mission at Troas, and I believe encompasses much of that encouragement, much of what that looked like, as Paul did throughout the entire region.

[20 : 12] He highlights this, Luke does. Acts is sort of viewed as a book that if you ever watch Sports Center, well, we already talked about the goat stuff.

We won't divide the church today again over who's the goat. But Sports Center, they play highlight reels. Everything's kind of just like gluing us to the screen of what happened at the game.

We don't want to watch the balls and the strikes. We want to see the home runs, right? We want to see the slam dunks. We want to see the turnovers. We don't want to see time out, right?

Acts is a highlight reel, scriptive narrative to a man named Theophilus who funded this work through the writings of Luke.

And he chose to include this highlight reel. But why? This is known as the man, Eutychus, who didn't make it to the sermon's conclusion.

[21 : 15] He didn't make it to his Bob Evans reservations afterwards as he fell from a window. It's a popular one. Right out the gate, I imagine that it would be memorable.

That's probably why he included it. But theologically, why did he include it? We should inquire in this city. What did this encouragement look like that maybe Paul did across this entire region?

What details may Luke have left out in Macedonia but includes here? Well, we see some descriptions here. Look in verse 7. On the first day of the week. The first day of the week, what is that known as, church?

This is the Lord's Day. It's important. We see that apostolically observed Lord's Day. Some of us call it the Christian Sabbath where the Jewish Sabbath is Saturday but the apostles moved it to the first day of the week representing the risen Savior on Sunday.

So the Christians meet on Sunday. There's a little tidbit there. So they meet on the first day of the week. The church gathered to break bread. We see community there just like unleavened bread.

[22 : 21] But knowing that the business of ministry would end pretty quick, you know, it's like in the back of Paul's mind he's like, well, chaos is coming. I can't stay here for long.

Not like the three months in Greece but I can stay here for a little bit long, a little while but I have an eight-part series, sermon series I need to go through before I leave here.

And so he, before he leaves, he's basically indicating Luke, Luke's indicating here that this sermon was going to take a long time. It went on for all hours through the night.

And we see that in verse seven on the first day of the week when we were gathered together to break bread. Paul talked with them intending to depart on the next day and he prolonged his speech until midnight.

Long sermon. Don't harp on me anymore, guys. Paul did it. So this sets a scene here. The imagery, the details that Luke decides to include here.

[23 : 22] It's late at night in verse eight. What else is there? There's lamps. They're also in the third story of what may have been an apartment building.

And a recipe for disaster, mind you, if you're a tired young man sleeping next to a window. That's open, right? In verse nine, naturally, as the infamous story goes, Eutychus, this young man who fell asleep at this window, fell asleep.

and not only fell asleep, he fell to his death. A deep sleep indeed, right? To the ground from three stories.

And it's not in our English translation, but in some translation it talks about how child services was then called and the parents were arrested for letting their kid be up against that window.

I'm just kidding. That's a Brent translation. But I could imagine, think about this scene.

[24 : 30] It might be funny, we can joke about it, you know, about this Eutychus, but could you imagine sitting in a room being encouraged by the community of God and all of a sudden Paul knows that chaos is about to ensue the next day, but chaos showed up a little early.

And all of a sudden all these flashbacks of family members see that boy go out the window, they see the boy hitting the ground mangled, maybe in like a pretzel shape.

If you've seen movies you can get the image. We don't know what it looked like, we don't know what they saw, but we know what they felt. It was fear. How could this happen?

Forget the message, Paul. Pause it. We don't care. You're on your 13th point of 50 points. This kid's dead. I can imagine this entire room shocked, horrified, silent, silent, and in fear.

In verse 10, look with me. It says, But Paul went down and bent over him and talking, and taking him, sorry, in his arms, said, Do not be alarmed for his life is in him.

[26 : 06] this is not as chaotic as it may appear to be because this boy was raised to life again.

Do not fear in the chaos. Do not be dismayed for God is with you. What verification of not only Paul's compassion to halt the word work and not say, forget the boy.

We need to get to the next point, guys. If you live, you live. If you die, you die. That's it. All right? No. Paul's compassion to halt everything, to enter into potential chaos, but also what verification of the God-given authority that rests in God's ultimate authority over life and death.

God's ultimate authority over the chaos. Similar accounts of Paul's actions are alluded to in this passage.

They resemble Elijah in 1 Kings chapter 17 where he took a child and God raised them to life. Elijah in 2 Kings 4 patterned after that.

[27 : 28] Same deal, same instance, and even Peter, if you remember, back in Acts chapter 9 did the same, which all reinforced God-given authority to validate their witness.

Why would Luke record this? Why these details? Maybe he wants us to understand that not even fear of death or even ensuing chaos should distract the church from gathering and receiving his word.

Just as earlier with Paul's busy mission journey and the work never distracted him from people, nor his people should be distracted from the word.

we see how they reacted here to that. In verse 11 and 12, how did they respond?

Well, fear of death couldn't break their fellowship in the church as they picked up where Paul left off. He's like, alright, now where was I at in point 13 of 50?

[28 : 37] It's midnight, we still have till daylight, right? He picks up right where he left off in this third story building. The resolve at the end of this late night of fellowship, look, this is important, look in verse 12, there was no little comfort.

What does that mean? A fancy word to say that they were greatly comforted. Greatly comforted. through the work of the word.

You might wonder why the ministry of the word is central to our gatherings at Steel Valley Church, why this serves as a central role when we get together, something that can't be traded for even a prayer, like this is heralding God's truth to the church and to the world publicly.

Well, here's a snapshot of the word centrality. It was always supposed to be central among God's people. Central. And Bonhoeffer, I love how he says, the Christ in our own hearts is weaker than the Christ in the word of our brother.

Sometimes we need it explained and presented to us. And greater the impact than just sitting in your home office reading his words, but sitting and gathering, hearing it proclaims.

[30 : 07] Central. What is central, or was central, though, within the work of his word? As this little boy was raised from the dead, you might ask, what's that word look like?

It's the power of the resurrection. The central focus of the mission is the word, or the central focus of the mission is the people.

Central focus of the people is the word, and what's the central focus of the word? The resurrection. The resurrection. The power of the resurrection.

It keeps us in faith during uncertainty through the chaos. Look at all the things that didn't occur that we might expect in our day. I mean, I don't know if you struggle to find excuses why you might have to leave from places, but I mean, these people could have been saying if this happened in our day, well, it's pretty late, Paul.

I mean, I'm a little hungry. When are you going to take the intermission? Right? Or that was terrifying. Doing a little forest gump, turning around to everyone.

[31 : 22] I'm going to go home now. I'm a little tired, right? Beard and all. Maybe they all grew beards because it took so long.

I'm going to go home now. Or maybe for some of us who are just like helicopters and injustice. You wait till I call my attorney. You neglected that child.

That's it. What's ministry like, church? Well, it's unexpected now. We see it's unpredictable. It's difficult. And chaos does not wait to enter into ministry, but God is Lord over the chaos.

But even amid all these struggles and unknowns, the central focus of God's people was God's word. In other words, the resurrection. The power of the resurrection holding you today.

Bringing you great comfort today. Today. How many of us might be challenged by the implications of such a passage or challenged by our proneness of distraction, easy distraction, mind you, in Paul's life or maybe even the people around Eutychus.

[32 : 40] Or even maybe just being like just kind of focused on self, just being tired and worn out, right? And neglecting the mission.

You see, what we are reminded is not to allow ourselves to overemphasize the things that distract us. The things that distract us are significant, but they don't get any power unless you give power to them in ministry work, the distractions.

What was Paul's distraction? Well, traveling, as you saw in the maps, contention, as we've seen throughout the weeks. These are a given.

Distractions. There's no other way around it, but what was Paul's primary focus? The people. You see, in focusing upon the people as a church, we cannot neglect our own needs of caring and edification within a body and in a community, or the needs of the lost that surround us, that are wandering the streets of Youngstown looking for hope.

We cannot neglect it. We cannot neglect all of that on account of avoiding busyness, right?

[34 : 04] What was Eutychus? The Eutychus gathering distraction. They were distracted by fear of death, by a little instance of chaos. But guess what? Those are all a given.

There's always going to be fear. There's always going to be chaos. But what was the Eutychus gathering's primary focus? The Word. It was the Word. You see, in focusing upon the Word, we cannot neglect gathering together formally like this on Sunday morning, or informally in small groups or on account of unexpected events.

We cannot neglect it or unpleasant emotions caused by the mission, that things are getting tough. In other words, don't be distracted from God's work.

Amen? When the mission is at hand, it's a call to check our focus, right? Friends, the mission is at hand at Steel Valley Church here in Youngstown.

The mission is at hand. As Luke writes to Theophilus, the office of Theophilus is wondering, how did that church be established? How did this thing start?

[35 : 20] How did it grow? Luke, come back with a report to me. Well, we know one thing, the focus was on people and it was the word.

Amen? The chaos around, whether good or bad, can't distract or detract from that focus unless we allow it to. Don't become distracted from God's work, Steel Valley Church.

Let's pray.