

The Book of Acts Study Guide

Chapters 19-20

19:1-7

Paul continued on his third missionary journey across Asia Minor to the west coast and the city of Ephesus. There he met some disciples, but it is incorrect to assume that they were disciples of Yeshua, because in that day it was common for rabbis or Jewish leaders to have *talmidim* (disciples). So Paul sought to ascertain who they followed, and he learned that they were disciples of John the Baptist. That meant these men believed in the things that John had preached:

- Repentance of sin.
- The coming of the Messiah (v. 4 – “the one who was coming after” John).
- The kingdom of God.
- Water immersion as a sign of repentance.

Likewise they would not have known about:

- The Messiah had come.
- Baptism in the name of Yeshua.
- The indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

In that way, they would be like the faithful people of the Old Testament, looking forward to the redemption of humanity. And while that redemption had already actually taken place, they were not aware of that fact and had been living in ignorance, which was not difficult to do in that day when communication was limited. Apparently Ephesus was one of those places, because in the previous chapter, Apollos was described as having the same beliefs as these particular disciples, and he, too was living in Ephesus. So just as Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos the rest of the story regarding Yeshua and the Holy Spirit, Paul gave these disciples the enlightenment they needed.

Having a clear understanding of the situation described in this chapter is important for a couple of reasons:

1. Some people use it as a basis for claiming that the Spirit indwells people subsequent to their salvation—a “second blessing.” But these disciples were not believers in Yeshua. It is only when they accepted Paul’s witness and believed in Yeshua at the moment recounted here in Acts 19, that the Spirit came on them (vv. 4-7). This chapter, then, is not normative nor does it serve as a pattern for all people. It relates to a specific time when people were looking forward to the coming of the One heralded by John the Baptist, and not realizing that He had already come.
2. Some people say that being good and religious is sufficient in God’s eyes. But here we see apparently godly people not enjoying the full blessings that come with believing in Yeshua—namely entering into the New Covenant and being indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

19:8-12

v. 8 – Paul maintained his practice of taking the message of Yeshua into the local synagogue in Ephesus. In this case he invested three months of his time doing so, which means the Jewish people there were initially open to what he had to say. His message centered around the

kingdom of God. Thus it would likely these points:

- Yeshua is the Messianic king of the kingdom.
 - Because the *Tanakh* depicts the Messiah as both the Suffering Servant and the exalted King, He would have to come twice. And the first time would not bring about the finality of the kingdom marked by the Messiah judging with righteousness and the wolf dwelling with the lamb (Isa 11:4,6).
 - The kingdom is not just a physical institution, but an inner spiritual state (Mat 5:19; 7:21).
- v. 9 – The word translated as “hardened” conveys the sense of an initial softness or receptivity becoming impenetrable or unreceptive. That tells us that some people will be curious about what we have to say but never end up believing it and will eventually become hostile toward our testimony. So Paul used wisdom by withdrawing from them. He applied in a practical sense Proverbs 9:7-8 –

“He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself, and he who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself. Do not reprove a scoffer, lest he hate you.”

A scoffer (KJV – scorner) is someone who mimics another person, or literally in the Hebrew, “mouthing at someone like trying to speak a foreign language without knowing it.” It is making light of reality and showing disdain for truth.

Notice also that they were being critical of The Way, which means the believing community continued to identify themselves at that time by that term, not as Christians like the non-believers were calling them (Acts 11:26).

- vv 9-10 – Paul then left the synagogue but continued speaking publicly in a school that belonged to an Ephesian man named Tyrannus. We do not know if this man was a Jew or a Gentile, but for two years both groups came there to hear him speak. As a result, between Paul’s travels and teaching in this school, everyone in Asia heard the message of the Gospel.

19:11-41

The remainder of this chapter deals with conflicts between the true power of The Way and that of pagan religions.

- vv 11-12 – As a confirmation of Paul’s status as an Apostle, he was able to perform “extraordinary miracles.” This is an important consideration for anyone who claims to be an Apostle today, and is consistent with Yeshua’s proclamation that the Apostles He called and sent face-to-face had unique authority to do the miraculous (Mat 10:1).
- vv 13-16 – Jewish exorcists attempted to utilize the power of the name of Yeshua for their own purposes. This encounter indicates that there is genuine power in the name, but only if it is used by believers in Yeshua as Messiah, Savior, Lord, God. The exorcists had been successful in conjuring up results in the spiritual realm, and they just thought that Yeshua was another power source. And that indicates there are other spiritual power sources, namely demonic ones.
- vv 17-20 – A wave of fear swept across the community. That does not mean that everyone became believers. But verse 18 indicates that confession took place. And in verse 19, the burning of their expensive books on magic and sorcery was an act of repentance. That is consistent with the biblical principle of not just confessing our sins, but taking steps to turn away from them.

- v. 21 – Paul indicated his plans to go to the most influential cities in that part of the world— Jerusalem (the capital of Judaism) and Rome (the capital of pagan religion). In both cases, his intent presumably was to preach the Good News.
- v. 23 – But before he could depart, he was caught up in another controversy.
- v. 25 – Because the people gave up their pagan practices, illustrated by their surrender of magic books that were worth 50,000 pieces of silver (equivalent to 50,000 days of wages), Paul was perceived to be a threat to the financial welfare of Ephesus and its patron deity Artemis.
- Artemis was the Greek equivalent of the Roman fertility goddess Diana. The temple in Ephesus erected in her honor was the largest structure in the entire Greek world, standing 425 feet long, 220 feet wide, 60 feet tall and with 127 columns on its perimeter. It was not just one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the man who was the compiler of that list, Antipater of Sidon, wrote that it was more brilliant than the other six (Antipater, *Greek Anthology* IX.58). It also served as a bank where kings, entire cities and wealthy merchants would deposit their gold and silver because Artemis was said to watch over its safety. Moreover, a secondary economic system developed around it, with people profiting from sales of artifacts and other related businesses. Instigated by a silversmith named Demetrius, the profiteering trade groups rose up against Paul because their prosperity was at risk.
- v. 26 –For good measure, he warned that Paul would harm their manner of worship all over Asia.
- v. 27 – And he declared that it would be a threat against the worship of Artemis.
- vv 28-31 – This mob of protesters headed to the theater of the city, which was a typical Greek amphitheater, although in this case a very large one. They dragged along with them two of Paul’s traveling companions. And Paul wanted to go there, too, no doubt to defend their position, but his disciples would not let him go.
- vv. 32-41 – So it became a typical episode of confusion and unrest. But finally the town clerk, whose responsibility was managing the temple assets, urged the mob to ignore the situation. His warning in v. 40, “we are in danger of being accused of a riot” is understandable since Ephesus was under the control of Rome, and disorder and disrespect for the law could lead to the loss of their privileged status as a “free city.” In the end, the crowd accepted his pragmatic approach.

? What can we learn from this episode regarding the conduct of Paul and the believers? They did not initiate the situation. Paul did not attempt to overthrow the rule of Rome, in spite of it being a pagan system. He simply preached the Good News without condemning the Ephesian way of life and worship. He carried out miraculous acts for the benefit of others without denying the right of people with different beliefs to live them out. It was the inner conviction of the people of the city that led them to repent of their ways. So this episode serves as an important example of godly conduct in an ungodly world.

20:1-6

Paul then left Asia and crossed the Aegean Sea again to Macedonia, and then south by land to Greece, where he stayed for three months, before retracing his steps to Macedonia and back to Asia. He was accompanied by a number of believers from the various communities where congregations had been established. The use of “we” in verse 6 shows that Luke, the author of Acts, was among them.

Paul's acknowledgment of the days of Unleavened Bread demonstrates that he was still observing the feasts and thus had not forsaken his Jewish heritage or the value of God's commandments in the Torah.

20:7-12

The next section describes what transpired at the port city of Troas on the northwest coast of Asia. Verse 7 is often used as a justification for believers meeting for worship exclusively on Sunday. The reasoning is that because they broke bread, it must be the Lord's Supper, so it must have been a worship service, and thus worship on Sunday mornings became normative for all congregations. The validity of that assertion requires a consideration of the scriptural evidence:

- We are told that they did in fact gather on the first day of the week. When we express the Hebraic way of reckoning time in modern terms, the first day of the week begins on Saturday at sunset.
- We are further told that Paul's message lasted until midnight. So he spoke during the period between sunset and midnight on Saturday. Thus the meeting did not take place during the daytime on Sunday.
- The people gathered together to break bread. The meaning of the term, "breaking bread" in that culture is essential for understanding what took place here in Acts 20. Two possibilities exist—sharing a common meal or observing the Lord's Supper. Here are all of the uses of the term in Scripture:
 - When Yeshua fed the crowd of 4,000 followers miraculously in a common meal, we are told that He broke the bread for them (Mk 8:6). Later on, He referred back to that occurrence by only referring to the breaking of bread, not the miraculous provision of fish (Mk 8:18-20). So here Yeshua clearly used the term "breaking bread" to refer to an entire meal that people shared.
 - Likewise, after his resurrection, when Yeshua spent time with two disciples on the road to Emmaus He shared an evening meal with them, but the only specific food mentioned was the breaking of bread (Lk 24:29-31).
 - In Acts 2:46 it is very clear that the term refers to a common meal:

"And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart."
 - Later, in Acts 27 when Paul was at sea on his difficult final journey and all of the people onboard had not eaten for 14 days, he said:

"Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation; for not a hair from the head of any of you shall perish." And having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all; and he broke it and began to eat. . . And when they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea (Acts 27:34-36,38).
 - There are three times in Scripture that clearly relate to the Lord's Supper. And in every case, both the unleavened bread and the cup of redemption from the Passover are always mentioned (Mat 26:26-27; 1 Cor 10:16; 11:24-25), not just breaking bread alone
 - And lastly, right here in Acts 20, we are told that after Eutychus fell asleep and then fell

from the window, either killing him and being revived by Paul or he just appeared to be dead and Paul ascertained that he was still alive, we are then told in verse 11 that everyone went back to the room and then they broke bread a second time. And Paul kept on speaking until daybreak. It makes no sense that if breaking bread meant the Lord's Supper every time believers gathered, they would do so a second time in one gathering. It makes much more sense that they were together for such a long time that they just got hungry again and they brought out more food for another common meal.

So when we look at the immediate context in this chapter and elsewhere in Scripture, we see that breaking bread is primarily a Hebraic idiom for eating a common meal. And when passages refer to the Lord's Supper, it is clearly identified as such and it always includes references to the cup of redemption. Thus this passage in Acts 20 cannot be used as a justification for always meeting on the first day of the week. Moreover if you do take that position, in order to be consistent, you would have to meet on Saturday night, not Sunday morning (even though both are part of the first day of the week), and you would have to observe the Lord's Supper not once but twice. This passage, then, is merely a description of a group of believers gathering together (possibly after the end of the Sabbath), and they got hungry and had a common meal, then many hours later they got hungry again and brought out more food.

20:13-17

Paul and Luke and the other traveling companions continued on their journey southward along the coast of Asia until they reached the city of Miletus. Paul's intent was to get to Jerusalem in time for Shavuot/Pentecost (Feast of Weeks). This shows that he remained faithful to God's commandments regarding the pilgrimage feasts, which called for adult Jewish males to be in Jerusalem for Shavuot. He also wanted to make these things clear to the Messianic Jewish community of Jerusalem because he had been investing much time in reaching out to Gentiles. So he was not just making a theological point by his actions in addition to his words, but it was important to him personally.

Shavuot takes place 50 days after the Sabbath associated with Passover. 19 of those days are described in verse 6, and the travels of verses 13-15 entailed several more days. So at this point he had used up slightly more than half of the days of the *omer* (the counting until Shavuot). Because his time was limited and he had a long way still to go, Paul decided not to visit Ephesus again, even though it was where he had founded a key believing community. But not wanting to completely abandon them, he called for the elders to come to Miletus for a personal exhortation.

20:18-38

The character of Paul is apparent in this passage. He is depicted as being:

- v. 19 – humble (he lived a simple life, supported himself by tentmaking, and never became rich, cf. vv. 33-34)
 - compassionate (he shed tears on behalf of others, cf. v. 31)
 - able to endure trials
- v. 20 – courageous
- v. 23 – had a strong relationship with God
- v. 24 – sacrificial (he was willing to give up his life for the benefit of others)

In Paul's exhortation to the elders in v. 28 that they are to "shepherd the church (assembly, body of believers)" conveys these responsibilities:

- To keep the flock together.
- To guide them on their journey.
- To make sure they get fed adequately.
- To keep them calm and not agitated.
- To watch out for those who are vulnerable and to rescue them if necessary.
- To defend them against predators.
- And to chasten them when they get out of line.

In vv. 29-30 Paul warned that the flock (body of believers) would face threats from the outside and the inside. This threat can be manifested in today's believing community as well. There are many people on the internet and traveling around the world who are not properly educated, and thus do not have the skills to rightly divide the Word of God. But it is easy to find followers who are not able to discern their errors. So you can have the people influencing the flock from the outside, and believers on the inside receiving these messages and then spreading them around among themselves. We can be alert for such things, as he says in verse 31 by appointing qualified leaders and by testing their teachings against the Word of God.

vv. 36-38 – In the end, Paul prayed for them, they responded with tears of their own, and then he left the elders to carry on without him.