

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 20

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, especially his fellow workers, for what would be the last time. They met after the Sabbath ended for the purpose of sharing a meal together. Because it was Paul’s last opportunity to talk to them, he spoke for such a long time that they became hungry again and they brought out more food. And then Paul continued talking until daybreak, when he left them for good.

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 words and actions, 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.