

**Text:** Ac 20.7-13

**Proposition:** The sermon is that element of Christian worship that most edifies the soul.

Our passage today is a well-known passage about Eutychus, the young lad who, according to some, is “the patron saint of such as fall asleep in church.”

In a nutshell, the scene in Troas, near the site of ancient Troy, is a church service. The apostle Paul is preaching. It is near midnight, he has preached a good while already. A young boy nods off, and nods right out a third story window. The young fellow *dies*! But as we know, Paul takes him up, raises him from the dead, and all is well. And preachers make jokes about sleeping in church ever since.

The story is humorous in retrospect, but one commentator rightly cautions us:

“This, of course, was not a laughing matter. The fall evidently killed him. It could only be viewed with humor retrospectively in light of its happy ending because through the apostle, God turned tragedy into joy.”<sup>1</sup>

We will talk a bit about falling asleep in church, as that is part of the story.

However, that’s not really what the message is about.

Our subject today is the sermon – that persistently common feature in church worship since the beginning.

Christian worship almost always (and this is true through the ages) contains these elements:

- Scripture reading
- Prayer
- Hymns of faith
- The Sermon
- The Communion Service

There are a few other things we do, perhaps they aren’t as universal as these four elements. Of these common elements, one of them, the hymns, fell out of style among some Puritans and other Reform minded brethren. These reminded too much of Rome, so these Reformers dispensed with them — no singing!

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<sup>1</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 418.

Our attention today is not on the music or other elements in the service, but on the sermon. The story highlights the attendance of this church on the preaching.

What is it about preaching that captures the attention of the heart such that believers would willingly sit up all night listening?

Read Ac 20.7-13

**Proposition:** The sermon is that element of Christian worship that most edifies the soul.

## I. The Institution of the sermon

### A. On the occasion of the sermon (“first day of the week”)

1. The text is lit. “and in the first of the sabbaths” (idiom for a week)
2. The service begins in the evening
  - a. Likely many Christians were slaves and not free until the evening
  - b. Eutychus, for example, is a slave name (it means “fortunate,” or “lucky”)
  - c. It is the last night before Paul’s departure (apparently for last time)

The timing allows for as many as possible to hear; and specially to hear Paul for the last time.

3. This is the earliest text mentioning a “breaking of bread” (communion) on the first day of the week
  - a. More on this in the afternoon service
  - b. The day became the *normal* day for Christian worship, if not well instituted at this point

When Christians gathered, from the beginning, the sermon was central (see Ac 2.42)

Ac 2.42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

## B. On the length of the sermon

1. Luke comments on the length three times
  - a. he prolonged his message until midnight (7)
  - b. Paul kept on talking (9)
  - c. he talked with them a long while until daybreak (11)
2. The Scriptures give no standard for sermon length
  - a. The longest, the Sermon on the Mount, takes maybe twenty minutes to read aloud
  - b. All the rest are shorter: we conclude these are summaries
3. Sermon length tends to be a cultural thing
  - a. Places where the gospel newly attends tend to have longer sermons
  - b. Places where a long standing tradition develops tend to have shorter sermons (wealthier, more sophisticated, more busy??)

I recall in the book called *The Scotch-Irish*, the author discussed the change that came over Scotland when the Reformation took hold. From a wild, ungovernable rabble, the population changed to one dedicated to the church and preaching. One account had a man do his chores at home, walk four hours to a church, stand for several hours hearing the preaching, walk the four hours back, and do his evening chores.

The length of this sermon was unusual, but long sermons in the early church were likely *not* unusual. It speaks to what the sermon was like.

## C. On the centrality of the sermon

1. The only other service element the text mentions is “breaking of bread”
  - a. This is, in the first instance, communion (7)
  - b. In the second instance, likely a whole meal (11)

2. The sermon is prominent
  - a. Central to the story, of course
  - b. But central to the service as well

Broadus: "Preaching is characteristic of Christianity. No other religion has ever made the regular and frequent assembling of the masses of men, to hear religious instruction and exhortation, an integral part of divine worship."<sup>2</sup>

## II. Interaction with the sermon

### A. Deep attention to the sermon

1. Again, the sermon length suggests this
2. The young man listening intently also suggests this
  - a. He is not old; the term could be a youth between say 8-14
  - b. The evening is late; Luke mentions the lamps
    - 1) Obviously because darkness came upon them
    - 2) Would make the crowded room stuffy
  - c. The young man sits in the open window for air: indicates fighting the sleep stealing upon him
    - 1) First, he is sinking into sleep
    - 2) Then he is overcome by sleep [same word in both]

*Bearing down into sleep* — the word "describes the gradual process of going into deep sleep."

3. In the intense listening of the crowd, no one notices the boy's danger

Of course, the fall of "Fortunate" Eutychus brings everything to a halt, they rush downstairs to succor him if possible. — We will come back to this.

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<sup>2</sup> John Albert Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed. Jesse Burton Weatherspoon, New and Revised (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), 1.

## B. Resumption of the sermon

### 1. After the interruption and after the meal, what do they do?

he talked with them a long while until daybreak (11)

### 2. The sermon resumes

a. The fall took place about midnight (7)

b. The resumed preaching continued till daybreak (11)

c. Allowing an hour for the incident and the meal, with daybreak about 0430 am, about another three hours of preaching

We mentioned that many Christians were slaves — they were up at daybreak the day before to work, they spent the night listening to preaching, then would head out once again to a day of work before they could rest.

I found a sermon by a black Baptist preacher on line. He had this comment:

“Paul had been preaching now a long time. Did I say a long time? We like to say that the attention span is only 14 minutes so we should not preach longer than that. We can’t hold the congregations attention longer than 20 minutes max. I have even heard Seasoned Saints suggest if the Preacher can’t say it in less than 20 minutes, it does not need to be said.

- Did you turn the Super Bowl off after 20 minutes?
- Did you walk out of the Thunder Game after 20 minutes?
- Do you walk off your Job Monday morning after 20 minutes?
- Did you turn off Scandal or How To Get Away With Murder 20 minutes into program?
- Did you walk out the Movie Theatre after first 20 minutes?
- Seems like our attention span is only short on Sunday Morning<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Lawson, “The Danger Of Falling Asleep In Church,” *Sermon Central* (blog), accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-danger-of-falling-asleep-in-church-wayne-lawson-sermon-on-falling-asleep-191398?page=2&wc=800>.

### III. Importance of the sermon

#### A. Emphasized by those who train preachers

Stott: "Preaching is indispensable to Christianity. Without preaching a necessary part of its authenticity has been lost. For Christianity is, in its very essence, a religion of the Word of God."<sup>4</sup>

Jones: "'Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature,' was our Lord's commission to His disciples. Preaching was to be their first duty and most important work."<sup>5</sup>

Spurgeon: "We do not enter the pulpit to talk for talk's sake; we have instructions to convey important to the last degree, and we cannot afford to utter pretty nothings. ... However beautiful the sower's basket it is a miserable mockery if it be without seed."<sup>6</sup>

#### B. Authorized by apostolic precedence

1. In their training, Jesus sent them out to preach (Mk 3.14) [but limited at the time to "the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 10.5-7)]
2. The Great Commission sent the apostles preaching (Mt 28.19-20, Mk 16.15)
3. They went out and preached everywhere (Mk 16.20)
4. Peter opens the church with preaching (Acts 2), they continue preaching "with boldness" (Ac 4.31)
5. The apostles asked for deacons to devote themselves to prayer and preaching (Ac 6.4)
6. Paul persists in preaching through his missionary journeys, ending up under house arrest in Rome, but "preaching unhindered" (Ac 28.31) [last verse of Acts]

Ac 28.31 preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

<sup>4</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Bob Jones, Jr., *How to Improve Your Preaching*, Enlarged (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1960), 9.

<sup>6</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, rpt. (Lynchburg, VA: Old Time Gospel Hour, 1894), 72.

### C. Illustrated by the interruption

1. Let's come back to "Lucky" Eutychus
2. The shock of his fall from the window prompted sudden response, interrupted the sermon

One can imagine the apostle coming to a point, when a sudden cry is heard, and someone shouts, "He fell out the window."

I recall a powerful sermon in Greenville, where Dr. Bob Jones Jr was interrupted by a tornado... a ceiling tile fell down and he took charge...

3. They rush down to the boy to find him stricken, dead
4. Paul takes him in his arms (like Elijah and Elisha), and says, "His life is in him."

Some scoff that Paul didn't raise him from the dead, he just calmed their fears.

One commentator: "holds that ζωντα [zōnta] (living) here is pointless unless he had been dead. He had been taken up dead and now they brought him living."<sup>7</sup> (v. 12)

5. Think about the occasion: It is Sunday (or the wee hours of Monday by now)
  - a. Why do they worship on Sunday?
  - b. It's *resurrection day*
  - c. Why do we preach?
  - d. To bring *resurrection* to souls

### Conclusion:

**Proposition:** The sermon is that element of Christian worship that most edifies the soul.

In the sermon, there is *life!* ... because we preach the *Word of life!*

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<sup>7</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ac 20.12.