

Death By Sermon

ACTS 20:7-12

**Baxter T. Exum (#1556)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
July 26, 2020**



It is good to be with you again this morning. If you are joining us online or on the phone, we are also glad that you can be with us. Most of you are able to see that we are starting as we have for several months now, with a brief summary of God's plan for our salvation. God sent his Son to this earth as a sacrifice for our sin, and we respond to that gift of salvation by believing the message, by repenting of sin, by confessing Jesus as the Son of God and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism.

And once again, we have some examples. The first comes to us from the Myrtle Avenue Church of Christ in Long Beach, California, as Jesse is baptized earlier this week. We rejoice with Jesse and with his new Christian family.

And we also have a few pictures of Ms. Helen, 90 years old, who was baptized just a few days ago at the Sebring Avenue congregation in Sebring, Florida. So, we've seen baptisms this morning from east to west, from one side of the nation to the other, from California to Florida, and we are thankful for the good news this morning. And again, we are sharing these images by way of encouragement: What Jesse and Ms. Helen have done this week, you can do this morning. If you have any questions or concerns about God's plan, we invite you to get in touch. If you are watching online, our contact information should be on the screen, just under the video, and if you are listening on the phone, the church number is 608-224-0274. I hope you will call or text me at that number.

This morning, I would invite you to think with me about some of the most unfortunate times to fall asleep. Perhaps some of you have heard someone say that I would love to die peacefully in my sleep, like my grandfather, not screaming, like his passengers. We understand that "while driving" is not a good time to fall asleep. We might think of other times where we've struggled to stay awake – in a class of some kind, or maybe while watching a movie. Sometimes I will refer to a movie as a \$9 nap.

We have several references in the Bible to some strange things happening when people fall asleep. We think about Adam who fell asleep and woke up missing a rib and having a new woman appear by his side. We think about Sisera, the Canaanite army commander who fell asleep and woke up with his head nailed to the ground. We think about Samson who fell asleep and woke up bald and beaten. We think about Jonah who fell asleep on a boat and woke up in a storm, only to be thrown overboard and swallowed by a great fish. We think about the Peter, James, and John, who kept falling asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We could make an entire series out of these, but this morning, I would invite you to think with me about a young man who became famous for being the first person to fall asleep during a long sermon. I am referring to a young man by the name of Eutychus (in Acts 20:7-12). We often navigate our way through the Bible by focusing on the main characters, leaders like Abraham, and Moses, and David, and Peter, and Paul, but so much of the Bible becomes truly relevant to us as we discover people like us. Eutychus is one of these minor characters. So, if you have ever been tempted to fall asleep during a long sermon, Eutychus is for you!

And what always impresses me here is that Luke, the author, calls him out by name! Luke, of course, could have very easily said, "There was this guy who fell asleep," but he doesn't leave it there, does he? He gives us the young man's name, and so, for the rest of eternity, Eutychus will forever be known as the guy who fell asleep during Paul's sermon. How embarrassing! And yet, at the same time, what an honor as well! As I've pointed out a number of times: Sometimes when somebody is identified by name in scripture, it's because they go on to be known in some way. So, as we go into this, I'm open to the possibility that Eutychus goes on to become a preacher, or an elder, or a missionary. In other words, by the time Luke writes this many years later, he calls him by name, because his readers might know the man.

I'll admit that I have laughed quite a bit as I've studied Eutychus this week. Besides thinking about this guy being permanently called out in scripture like this, I've also thought about the challenge of preaching shorter sermons over the past few months. As you know, we've been trying to keep worship a bit shorter, and now, here I am this morning, doing the best I can to preach a short sermon about a long sermon that was so long that it actually killed a guy! The struggle is real! Over these past few months, I've thought quite a bit about the time when Woodrow Wilson was asked by a member of his Cabinet about his short speeches. The man asked how long it took him to prepare those speeches, and the president said, "It depends. If I am to speak ten minutes, I need a week for preparation; if fifteen minutes, three days; if half an hour, two days; if an hour, I am ready now." You might think that a short speech takes less time to prepare than a longer speech, but that is not the case. So here I am, trying to preach a short sermon about a sermon that was so long that a young man falls asleep and falls out the window and dies!

By way of background, we need to know that Paul is on his third and final missionary journey. He's on his way back to Jerusalem to deliver some famine relief. He's in a hurry, but he takes the time to stop in Troas. Troas is a port city on far northwest side of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). He apparently just misses a Lord's Day assembly, so he stays there for a week to catch the next one. This brings us to Acts 20:7-12.

⁷ On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.

⁸ There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. ⁹ And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. ¹⁰ But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, "Do not be troubled, for his life is in him." ¹¹ When he had gone back up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while until daybreak, and then left. ¹² They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.

This morning, let's ask: Why is this story so important so as to be included in the book of Acts? And more specifically: What can we learn from Eutychus?

I. **I would make several observations, starting with the fact that EUTYCHUS SEES THE IMPORTANCE OF COMING TOGETHER AS A CHURCH TO BREAK BREAD AND TO HEAR THE WORD OF GOD.**

Yes, Eutychus falls asleep and dies during a sermon, but Eutychus is there! Along with the rest of the church, Eutychus comes together on the first day of the week to break bread. This is their habit. This is their custom. They were there, not because Paul was there, but Paul was there because they were there! In fact, Acts 20:7 is one of the few passages indicating that the early church met on the first day of the week, and if it weren't for Eutychus falling asleep, we probably wouldn't even have this reference. Some of you might remember the "ABC's of Acts," where we have a letter for each chapter. The letter for Chapter 20 is T: Troas on the Lord's Day. So, we find here that the early church comes together on the first day of the week – the day of the Lord's resurrection, the day the church began (in Acts 2), it is the "**Lord's Day.**" And even when traveling, even when simply passing through this area, Paul knew that the church would be meeting. And Eutychus knew it as well, and he was there.

I should point out briefly that the name Eutychus basically means "fortunate" or "lucky." Some scholars have pointed out that this was a common name for slaves in the First Century. It's possible, then, that Eutychus is a slave. And this helps explain why the church most likely met in the evening. They met when most could come together, after working all day. So if this is true, it helps explain why Eutychus is so tired, and it also helps explain the need for "**many lamps.**" They met in the evening. And yet, even though they had other obligations (work to do, children to care for, and so on), they still managed to be together as a church all night long – for the Lord's Supper, for a long sermon from Paul, and also for some extended teaching and fellowship all the way until daybreak the following morning. This reminds me that the early church met "**on the first day of the week,**" but on that day they would meet whenever they could meet. Today, we have the luxury of saying, "Hey, let's meet at 9 and 10:30, but in Troas in the mid 60's AD, the church met at night, because that is when they could meet.

When we first moved to Janesville, I went through all of the old files, and I found newspaper ads from the 50s' and 60's, where the church would have gospel meetings, and they would meet every day at 5 or 6 a.m. and then again at 6 or 7 p.m. I'm sure it was hard on the guest speaker, but they met at those times because of the GM plant down there. People would come to hear the gospel preached and would invite their friends at 6 in the morning. Worship and study might not always be convenient, but it is important. I think of growing up in the Chicago area and what we would refer to as "Area-Wide Meetings." Once a month on a Monday night, we would meet together at one of the area congregations to hear the word of God. Monday was a school night. Some of these churches were more than an hour away. We wouldn't get home until late at night. But study was important. And that is pretty much what we find here in Acts 20.

And so, we learn from this, first of all, that Eutychus is present. Eutychus shows up, 1.) to remember Jesus, 2.) to hear the word of God, and 3.) to fellowship with God's people. Eutychus sees that worship is important.

II. **As we go back to the text, let's also notice that Eutychus SUCCUMBS TO HUMAN WEAKNESS.**

I know "succumb" isn't a word I use very often, but it really describes what happens here. In a sense, he "gives in" to human weakness, but that almost seems to blame Eutychus in a way he doesn't really deserve. I looked up the etymology (the background, the history) of the word "succumb" this morning, and it goes back to Latin and an Old French word meaning "to lie down under." And if you look at the word, you might recognize the same root word we see when we refer to a "recumbent" bicycle (a bike where you lay down to ride it). To "succumb" is to bring low, to overwhelm, to consent reluctantly, to be fatally overwhelmed, to sink or to give

way under. On the news, we might hear that somebody was attacked and that they later “succumbed to his injuries.” He didn’t give up; no, he wanted to live, but due to human weakness, the body could no longer continue. That’s what we see here. What I’m trying to say is: Eutychus is human! Humans need sleep, and Eutychus, as eager as he is to partake of the Lord’s Supper, and as eager as he is to listen to the apostle Paul, he falls asleep. And I feel like I need to make a point of this, because I have read some absolutely terrible interpretations of this passage over the past week or so. I’ve seen people use this passage as a way to condemn people for falling asleep in church, “If you fall asleep in church, you deserve to fall out a window.” That kind of thing. I’ve seen people blame Satan for this, “Satan pushed this young man out the window to create a distraction.” I’ve seen people suggest that God killed this young man for his lack of attention. I’ve seen people blame Paul for preaching too long. And the more I read, the more I keep saying, “No! This is not what this passage is teaching!” And I can say this, because Luke (the author) doesn’t say anything like this. And on the scene, Paul doesn’t seem to blame anybody. And so we read this passage over and over, and we come to the conclusion that the young man is tired! There’s a good chance he’s worked all day. There’s a good chance he needs to work the next day. Eutychus is a mere mortal! I’m thinking again of Peter, James, and John in the Garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus keeps finding them asleep, he is obviously disappointed, but ultimately the Lord realizes that **“the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”** In the same way, Eutychus has a good heart, but that heart is in a human body.

Going back to the text, Luke, a medical doctor, seems to describe a progression. In verse 9, he describes Eutychus, **“sinking into a deep sleep,”** and then, as Paul keeps on talking, he is **“overcome by sleep.”** Haven’t we all had that “sinking” feeling? We fight it, but it’s coming, and there’s nothing we can do about it! Not only that, but Luke (as a doctor) also makes sure we know that there are **“many lamps”** in that upper room. I’m thinking fumes, a lack of oxygen, carbon monoxide! So, we have a few things going on here, but the point is: Eutychus is human. Yes, we can criticize Eutychus, but Paul doesn’t. Luke doesn’t. Because Eutychus is present for worship. When’s the last time any of us were here in this building listening to preaching at midnight? We might criticize our building, but what if it was so crowded we had to sit in a window?

And I’ll tell you: This is something that I have tried to keep in mind as a preacher. When I see people fall asleep, I never take it personally. I don’t know what you went through last night. I don’t know what medications you might be on or what medical conditions you might have. I will never be offended. But instead, I am glad you are here! We’ve had parents of young children who were up all night. In Janesville, we had a member who worked as a horticultural therapist with the developmentally disabled. She would grow tomatoes in a greenhouse as a form of therapy, she would show up Wednesday evening in her coveralls covered in the black tar from the tomato sap, and she would eat McDonald’s in the parking lot before coming in for class after having worked for the past 12 hours. I have nothing but admiration for that godly woman. Of all people who could have justified going home for a shower and to crash in bed, she’s at the top of the list, but she came to Bible class anyway. We’ve had people here in Madison work all night and then come here after work at 9 in the morning. If you snooze, I promise to wake you up before locking up for the week.

I hope I’m not the only one to admit this, but I see a bit of humor in this passage. Maybe I’m just weird, but I appreciate the humanity of this passage. It happens to all of us. It’s also a bit comforting to me as a preacher: If the apostle Paul can lose somebody, then who am I to think that it might not happen here? We are human – on the preaching end and also on the receiving end. But thankfully, Eutychus’ weakness allowed all of those assembled together that day to get a small glimpse of God’s power. And that leads us to our third and final big idea this morning...

III. ...that God uses Eutychus to demonstrate his POWER TO RESTORE, to make things right, to fix this.

We see God in this passage – in the resurrection itself, and also in the church coming together. I guess I need to start by saying that Eutychus is indeed dead! Many have suggested that the young man is simply knocked unconscious, that he gets the wind knocked out of him, that he has a concussion of some kind, and Paul goes down and basically performs CPR of some kind and brings him back. No, Eutychus is dead! And I can say this because of the **“we”** up in verse 7. In the book of Acts, whenever we have a **“we”** in the passage, it means that Luke is there. Luke, then, is an eyewitness, and we know (again) that Luke is a doctor, the **“beloved physician.”** And in Luke’s professional medical opinion, the young man is **“dead.”** The word he uses in verse 9 is NEKROS. If Luke thought he was simply unconscious, he would have said so. But he falls from the third floor, and he is **“dead.”**

So, Paul goes down and **“falls upon him and embraces him.”** That’s a bit strange, until we realize that Elijah and Elisha both do something similar back in 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4. Both a young man and a man are dead, they embrace them or stretch out on top of them, and they come back to life. Paul seems to do something similar with similar results. And Eutychus comes back from the dead as Paul says, **“Do not be troubled, for his life is in him”** (very similar to what Jesus says when he raises Jairus’ daughter). Eutychus is brought to his Christian family, and they are **“greatly comforted,”** or more literally, they are **“not a little comforted,”** a figure of speech.

And what I also need to point out here is that Paul goes right back to preaching, until daybreak! His word is confirmed by the resurrection. And at some point they all eat a meal together. What an example for us! As a congregation, they spend the whole night together. But the main idea here is: What happens to Eutychus allows God to do what God does – he restores, he makes things right.

Conclusion:

I’ve never preached on Eutychus before, and as I said, there are some weird interpretations of this passage out there, but I think we’ve treated it fairly this morning. As we close, I would just briefly point out that about four years after this, Paul is under house arrest in Rome, he writes to the church in Ephesus, and he quotes from Isaiah in a passage ****PPT**** that has to remind him of what happened back in Troas,

¹⁴ For this reason it says, “Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” ¹⁵ Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of your time, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:14-16)

And that is our prayer today.

Let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God, the only one with the power to raise up from the dead. This morning, we are thankful for Eutychus – for his dedication and example in coming together with his Christian family for worship, we are thankful for his example of humanity (we are thankful that your word tells us both the good and the bad so that we can learn from the example of others), and we are also thankful for your power to make things right, for your power to restore.

Be with us as we encourage each other this week. Thank you for Jesus. We come to you in his name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com