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When God Slows You Down

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

We last left Paul in the city of Ephesus where he had spent over two years. By the time he left there was a vibrant church there with its own elders and pastors. And perhaps it was while Paul was in Ephesus that he began to think about the future. Although he had spent more time in Ephesus than in any other city, Paul wasn't one to settle down for long; he was constantly thinking about expanding, reaching the unreached and finding new fields to harvest. It was in this connection that Paul began to make plans to go to Jerusalem and then onto Rome and even further west to Spain. As a matter of fact, before Paul even left Ephesus Luke tells us of these plans in 19:21. **"Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome.'"**

We don't know how much time passed before he actually left Ephesus, but the interesting thing is that once he set out for Jerusalem it would take him about two years to get there! It wasn't that long of a journey. You could get there in a few weeks. But what we're going to see is that Paul's dreams for expansion had to be balanced with some other very important priorities. Not only that, some things would happen along the way that Paul never anticipated. I guess you could say that God slowed him down.

I think this is very helpful for us to understand: life doesn't always go according to our schedule or plans. Don't get me wrong; like Paul, it's not wrong to dream and set goals. Most of us have goals of some kind, spoken or unspoken. We have goals for our career, our family, our finances, our ministry, our spiritual growth. And with these goals we make plans to reach them. Often we have to put some kind of timetable to mark and motivate our progress. But isn't it true that sometimes things don't go according to plan? Prov. 16:1 says, **"The plans of the heart belong to man, But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD."** And in v.9 it says, **"The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps."** An important part of our discipleship is accepting God's timetable for our lives, our plans, and our dreams, which usually means an act of surrender. Sometimes things happen slower than we thought. You never planned on

being 31 and single. You never planned on infertility and having to wait so long for a child. You never planned that it would take this long to progress in your career. You never planned that unforeseen financial responsibilities would delay your retirement. And God teaches us in all of this that HE's in charge and we're on his timetable, not our own.

Someone has said that the most important time is between the dreams, not the dreams themselves. One of the things that happens when God slows us down and makes us wait is that we're able to see things we can't see when we're in a hurry. Have you noticed that? If you're going from point A to point B in a hurry there are some things you're going to miss on the way, but if you slow down you notice things. One of the things we notice is people. In Paul's case, slowing down forced him to balance out his dreams to expand with the very real needs of the Christian community around him. Paul pays attention to the needs of the Christian community.

1. The need for exhortation: In chapter 20 we see Paul set out from Ephesus and several things happen he didn't plan on. **"After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and when he had exhorted them and taken his leave of them, he left to go to Macedonia. When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece"** (vv.1-2). Paul has a farewell meeting with the disciples at Ephesus. All it says is that "he exhorted them." Then he goes north towards Macedonia. Luke doesn't give us much detail here but some of the letters that Paul wrote during this time help us. We know that on the way to Macedonia Paul stopped at Troas. And this was a time of real struggle for Paul because he was very worried about what was going on with the church at Corinth. Paul had spent a year-and-a-half there before coming to Ephesus and had left Titus there. But while he was in Ephesus he heard about all kinds of problems in the Corinthian church. There were factions in the church. Immorality was rampant. People were getting drunk at the communion service. There were lawsuits between fellow believers. It was a mess! Plus, some of them thought Paul was a fraud. So he wrote them a straightforward letter about it, which we know as I Corinthians.

So Titus was supposed to meet Paul in Troas and report how they had responded to the letter. Listen to what Paul says in 2 Cor. 2:12-13, **“When I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.”** We don’t normally think of Paul as a worrier, but here he’s so anxious about the Corinthians that he can’t even take advantage of a great ministry opportunity in Troas. So he goes to Macedonia, hoping to find Titus, which in fact he did. Titus gave him good news about the Corinthians and Paul was greatly relieved.

All of this happened before we even get to v.2! Verse 2 describes his time in Macedonia where he traveled around from church to church and gave them “much exhortation.” Most scholars believe he did this for about a year. But Paul seemed to think these churches in Macedonia, like the Corinthians, needed “much exhortation.” What does that mean? Exhortation means encouragement, not just the kind that says “I hope you feel better” but the kind that also encourages you to do something. It’s encouragement with a kick. The closest analogy I can think of is cheerleading. It’s like he was cheering these people on in their faith, saying, “Keep following Christ. Don’t give up trusting in him. He’s there for you. We’re there for you.”

This is one of the needs we have to pay attention to when God slows us down. People need “much exhortation.” The reason we need that is because just like the early church we’re very much a work in progress. We have problems and issues and lapses like the church at Corinth. If all we think about is growth and expansion and we fail to pay attention to the maturity and health of the people who make up the church body, we will be like a big house built on sand. Honestly, that’s what I’m supposed to do for you here on Sunday mornings, along with our other teachers. We’re supposed to give you “much exhortation.” That’s a big part of why we come to church and meet together during the week. We need that. We need someone to cheer us on. We need someone to give us a little kick (with love, of course!). And as you wait for your goals to come to fruition, as you live in-between your dreams, you need to look at the people around you and ask, “Who needs this kind of encouragement?”

2. The need for unity and love: Then after a whole lot of that in Macedonia Paul moves down to Greece. Look at vv.3-6. **“And there he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. And he was accompanied by Sopater of Berea, the son of Pyrrhus, and by**

Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. But these had gone on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas. We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days; and there we stayed seven days.” Again, we know from his letters that he spent these three months in Greece in the city of Corinth, during which he wrote the book of Romans. But Paul still wants to get to Jerusalem. The problem is that now it’s winter and the seas were too rough to sail. He has to wait until spring. He probably hoped to get to Jerusalem by Passover.

But v.3 says when he was finally ready to set sail he found out about a plot against him by the Jews. Most likely, someone was planning to throw him overboard and pretend it was an accident. So Paul says, “Forget that! I’m going to travel by land instead.” So he heads north by foot, again through Macedonia. So much for his plan to be in Jerusalem by Passover! Once again, he’s slowed down.

Luke also mentions in v.4 that there were several guys traveling with him. Did you know that Paul hardly ever traveled alone? He was a team player. He almost always had guys with him, usually young guys that he was discipling and training. But these guys were also with Paul for a reason. They were representing their church in bringing an offering to Jerusalem. You see, the churches of Judea were experiencing hard times as a result of a famine. When Paul found out about that he had an idea. What a great opportunity to unify the church by having the Gentile churches take up an offering for these Judean churches and bring it to Jerusalem. So all these Gentile churches had gotten together to do this and each area had sent a representative.

Years ago one of our elders and I had a chance to represent CPC as we brought a gift of \$10,000 to a needy church in Romania. We could have just sent the money, but there is something about having real people there to present the money. And when you do that there really is a kind of love and unity that develops between the people and churches.

This is another need that slowed Paul down. It was the need to express in tangible acts of love the unity of the church. We don’t think about that enough. There is a unity that we share with other churches right here on the Peninsula and other believers throughout the world. It’s not an organizational unity but it’s a spiritual unity that we have in Christ. And it’s important we find ways to express that, as we see here.

I’ve thought about that as it relates to our own

plans as a church to start new campuses here on the Peninsula. What if we went into a city and opened a new campus without any regard for the churches that are already there? What if we hurt those churches by stealing their sheep? What kind of witness would it be in that community if in trying to reach the lost we damaged the ones we call our brothers and sisters in Christ? So we have to slow down and pay attention to those things. We have to pay attention to unity and love in the body of Christ.

3. The need for worship: Next, Paul and Luke sail from Philippi to Troas where they meet up with the rest of the gang. It kind of looks like Paul is going in circles, but in Troas once again we see that slowing down allowed him to see and hang out with people. And so the next section shows us what happens as Paul is meeting with the believers in Troas for worship. **“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. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. 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. But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, ‘Do not be troubled, for his life is in him.’ 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. They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted”** (vv.7–12).

You might have guessed that this is every preacher’s favorite story! If someone fell asleep while the greatest preacher ever was doing his thing I shouldn’t feel so bad when I see a few of you nod off (and I DO see you! As a matter of fact a couple of you just woke up.). And some of you are very fortunate that you’re not seated three stories up by a window because you too could fall right through! I also feel rather justified in occasionally preaching over 40 minutes. As you see here, Paul droned on for several hours! So stop complaining about long sermons!

But let me just point out a few things about this story you might not have realized. First of all, this was a worship service. Notice they met on the “first day of the week,” which was Sunday. Remember that the Jewish Sabbath is on Saturday. Actually, this is the earliest evidence that Christians changed their Sabbath to Sunday to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus. And notice what they did when they worshipped: besides teaching, they gathered together to break bread. That’s a reference

to what we call communion or the Lord’s Supper, which they celebrated in the context of a meal. I’m sure they did other things as well, like sing and pray.

The reference to midnight tells us this was likely an evening meeting. Most everyone would have had to work during the day. No doubt they met in someone’s home as we know the early church didn’t have their own buildings. We don’t know how many people were there but it’s interesting that Eutychus is called a “young man” in v.9 and a “boy” in v.12, which probably means he was a teenager. No wonder he fell asleep! But before we’re too hard on Eutychus notice the mention of “many lamps” in v.8. That means the room would have been very stuffy and oily; those lamps use up a lot of oxygen. Maybe that’s why Eutychus was sitting by the window. But it didn’t help much as he finally succumbed to sleep, fell through the window and died.

The humor of this story shouldn’t lighten the impact of the tragedy this would have been for this little church. Somebody’s son was dead. It’s like one moment they’re praising the Lord and the next their hearts are breaking with shock and grief. This is what church life is like, isn’t it? But Paul goes down and much like Elijah in the Old Testament he falls on Eutychus and embraces him and brings him back to life. His words “Do not be troubled, for his life is in him” do not mean he hadn’t been dead but that, having been dead, he’s now alive. The amazing thing is when it was all over they just went back to the worship service. They broke bread and Paul continued his sermon! (“Let’s see, where was I?”)

But they weren’t the same. Luke says they were “greatly comforted.” And, ultimately, that’s what we need isn’t it? In the midst of all the tragedies and losses of life we need to be greatly comforted. And that happens when we’re with God’s people. That happens as we hear those words, “Do not be troubled!” Why? “Because there’s life!” I wonder if that’s the deeper significance of this incident. Paul would never see these people again. The next time they shared the Lord’s Supper together would be in heaven. Before that, all of them would die, even Eutychus. But in Christ they would all be raised again. And Eutychus is a picture of the reality of that resurrection and reunion. You see, whatever we have to face we can say, “Don’t be troubled. There is life!”

That’s why we meet together. So no matter how fast we’re going and how important our mission is we have to pay attention to the first day of the week. Why? Because it’s the time we meet together to hear the word and break bread and to remember the resurrection of our Lord Jesus so we can be “greatly comforted.”

4. The need for leadership: Finally, in vv.13-16

Paul and his companions make it as far as Miletus. Notice vv.16-17a. **“For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. From Miletus he sent to Ephesus...”** Paul is in a hurry. Now he wants to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost, which takes place 50 days after Passover. Not exactly what he had originally planned, but it will have to do. Notice he doesn't want to get bogged down in Ephesus. He seems to know that if he goes there he'll get pulled in again and may never make it out. But he still cares about the church and he especially wants to make sure that their leadership is on a firm foundation. So he calls for the elders to make the 20 mile trek from Ephesus to Miletus and meet with him while his ship is docked. Next week we'll look at what he says to them, but for now I want you to simply see that another need Paul had to pay attention to is that of leadership. And that slowed him down. But if we grow and expand but never invest deeply in training people to lead well, then new believers will be like sheep without a shepherd.

CONCLUSION

This story reminds us that the church is not all about our dreams for growth and expansion; the church is also a place where we pay attention to the needs of people. We pay attention to the need for exhortation and unity and worship and leadership. And sometimes God has to kind of slow us down so we can see those needs. When he slows us down we see more clearly what is going on around us; we see the needs of people.

Remember, the most important time is between the dreams, not the dreams themselves. In what ways might God be slowing you down in realizing your dreams so that, between the dreams, you can see the needs of people? How are you doing at managing the tension between your goals and your dreams and the realities of human needs around you, including your own?

Some of you, for example, need to pay more attention to your marriage. You would love to have that new job, but if you have that new job maybe you wouldn't be able to do that. Some of you need to pay more attention to your children. Maybe you're a single parent and you would love to get into a new relationship, but that would keep you from doing that. Some of you need to pay more attention your church family. You're anxious to move into a bigger house but that would take you ten miles further away and keep you from doing that.

If God is making you wait, look at what's really going on in the people around you, and you'll probably see why.