Miracles:
Falling Asleep During the Preachin’
Acts 20:7-12
Englewood Baptist Church
Sunday evening, Oct. 18, 2009

Open up your Bible to Acts 20.

As most of you know, we have been plowing through the long list of miracle stories in Scripture. Last week, Jared Schuler did an amazing job of exploring the odd tale of the tree that withers upon Jesus’ denunciation. That is a very dark passage as Jesus judges a fruitless tree and pronounces judgment upon all things that remain barren. That passage has a “wake up call” theme. Tonight’s passage, I guess you could say also has a “wake up call” theme because it is about a young man who falls asleep during the preaching of the Apostle Paul. Like Paul, I took have put a few people to sleep despite my best efforts at teaching. In fact, I think God may have placed this passage in Holy Scripture to encourage all those preachers who face lazy eyelids every Sunday. It’s a humbling thing to pour your heart and soul into a sermon, only to see the lights go out in the parishioners. But…if the Apostle Paul can do it, then I feel just a little bit better about myself. Thank you, Lord, for Acts 20. Let’s read this passage together.

Read Acts 20:7-12.

In the opening message of this series, I made the case that the Bible has miracles from cover to cover. From the creation of Genesis to the Red Sea parting of Exodus to the miraculous catch of fish in Matthew, Scripture records supernatural events in rapid fire and this generates all kinds of questions. In that initial message, I listed five commonly asked questions about miracles. Three, I have now answered in previous weeks, one I will answer tonight, and the others will remain for another week. Here are those five questions:

Questions about Miracles

What is a miracle?
What is the purpose of a miracle?
Do miracles still happen today?
Is there such a thing as false miracles, produces by demonic forces?
Should Christians seek miracles today?

Before we get into our passage tonight, let’s examine that fourth question.

Is there such a thing as false miracles, produced by demonic forces?
The answer to this question may surprise you. The answer is yes. I can give you multiple examples in Scripture where demonic forces enabled miracles to happen.

- **Pharaoh’s magicians worked miracles** (Ex. 7:11, 22; 8:7)

Of course, they soon had to admit that God’s power is greater than their own. The sorcerers were able to imitate Moses and make sticks turn to snakes. One has to admit that this is an incredible feat. However, Aaron’s staff turned to a snake and then gobbled the others up and licked his chops. They did other amazing things as well.

- **Simon the Sorcerer amazed people with miraculous feats.** (Acts 8:9-11)

This is a passage that we will examine next Sunday night. This man, Simon, has the crowd mesmerized by his bag of tricks. Philip comes along and makes Simon’s feats look petty, of course, and Simon wants to know how he can get some of that Holy Spirit magic. That’s good stuff, far more powerful than his own magic.

- **In Phillipi, Paul encountered a slave girl who “had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying.”** (Acts 16:16)
- **Paul says that when the antichrist comes, he “will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish.”** (2 Thess. 2:9-10)

These false miracles give credence to the man’s “false gospel” and many are deceived by his teaching and ideas. So what are we to think of all this?

**Conclusions About False Miracles:**

1. **The power of God is greater than the power of Satan.** You remember how the Bible reads in 1 John 4:4, “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” Whenever God’s people clash with evil, they have the ability to win and to conquer. The book of Revelation was written for that purpose, that we might know the power of God over evil and that in the end, God’s power obliterates Satan’s schemes. So don’t live in hear of the devil. God has given you the Holy Spirit and as Simon the Sorcerer observed, that Spirit is an unstoppable force.

2. **The identity of these workers of false miracles is always known through their denial of the true gospel.** In other words, it doesn’t take much discernment on the part of a grounded Christian to smell a phony. Just start asking questions about Jesus and you will learn quickly who this person works for. Jesus said, “if you are not for me, you are against me,” and no power of Satan will ever align itself with the amazing grace of God. So let us now worry that we will be deceived so long as we stay close to the blood of Calvary.
Stay tuned next week for an indepth study of Simon the Sorcerer and the false miracles he can perform.

Now, tonight, let us focus our eyes on this humorous, yet insightful story of Paul’s lengthy sermon in Acts 20.

Let me begin by saying that Acts 20 prevents us from getting legalistic about Sunday morning worship. It says that this church met, on the first day of the week, that is, Sunday. And they did not meet in the morning; they met at night. Of course, they didn’t have Sunday School and Lifeway was not providing the preschool curriculum. They gathered on Sunday night because they all had to work on that day. Sunday was like Monday to us. It was the first day of the week and so they gathered at night to hear Paul preach before he skipped town the next day.

As you all know, Sunday is not the Sabbath in Scripture. On the 7th day, God rested and that was always Saturday to the Jews. In the New Testament, the Christians chose the first day of the week, Sunday, for their special worship service since this was the day that Jesus rose from the dead. Sunday night services were the most convenient times to meet.

I know that some of you would probably love for Englewood to move to this model. You could sleep in on Sunday morning or go fishin’, then come to the assembly at night. At any rate, Luke gives us two main clues about why this man fell asleep. It’s important to notice these details. V. 8 says that there were many lamps lit in the upstair room. Most scholars believe that these lamps burnt oil and the oil emitted fumes. Those fumes made people sleepy and drowsy, so when many lamps are lit, the situation is only exacerbated. Not only that, but v. 9 does make it clear that Paul was a bit long-winded. He talked “on and on.” Now, I know as a preacher that I’ve got my own issues. I have been told that I speak way too fast when I get enthused about my subject matter. I have also been told that I spit a lot and that there is a reason why nobody wants to sit on the front row. I don’t believe however, that I am a long winded person. I have never been accused of preaching way too long. Paul, however, was struggling to wrap it up and took the liberty to preach till midnight.

Now combine those two things: odors from the lamps and ramblings from Paul. Throw in the fact that this was a work day, Sunday, in an agricultural society where most young men worked hard in the fields all day and what you have is one groggy revival service.

The casualty was a young man named Eutychus. He was probably between 7 and 14 years old. His name…I find this hilarious. His name means literally, “Fortunate.” Perhaps he did consider himself fortunate to fall out of that window and listen no longer. More likely, however, he lived up to his name, “fortunate,” when he was resuscitated by the apostle Paul.

Luke, the Spirit-directed author, of Acts was a doctor by profession. He knew dead when he saw dead. Just as a cashier can spot counterfeit bills and a lawyer can see through a liar, Luke had no problem diagnosing young Eutychus. V. 9, “he was picked up dead.” Some skeptics of
miracles have said that the boy was left for dead, but he did not die on impact. That explains why Paul could revive him. He didn’t actually die. But Luke says, without any ambiguity, the boy was picked up dead.

Finally, Paul sees this as a time to end the sermon. As he sees the chaos and the panic and the people running down to rescue the boy, he now closes his NIV Bible (I’m sure that’s what he was reading from.) He comes downstairs, and throws himself on the young man. He puts his arms around him, in a bear hug, screams, “Don’t be alarmed!” and then he says, “he’s alive!”

Notice v. 11, then they went back upstairs and took Communion, and stayed up all night talking. The boy went home alive and the people went home with great confidence in the power of God in raising man from the dead.

Now, let me take some time and share application that flows from this story.

What can we take away from this miracle story?

- This is a Kodak moment in salvation. The boy had fallen, and he was dead; he was given life by grace alone. Now that sounds an awful lot like the gospel. You and I have all fallen in Adam, we were once dead in our sins, and we were given life by grace alone. This is the core of the gospel message and spiritual meaning can be gained by looking deeper at the story. Why was this boy on the ledge? Because he chose to sit in a window. That’s his fault. Why was he dead? Because his own poor decision making cost him his very life. Why did he go home with a second chance? Because God, in his grace, breathed new life in him through the hug of the Apostle Paul. God wasn’t obligated to save the boy. It wasn’t God’s fault he chose to sniff lamps and then sit in a window, and yet, God shows grace and gives Eutychus an opportunity to live again. This time, a little differently.

We never see Eutychus again in the Bible. One day in heaven, he will have a great story to tell about the time he bungee jumped without a cord. But I wonder what came of him? I wonder if he went on to be a deacon, or a pastor, or a missionary? I wonder if he grew up and had a family and told his children how God had saved him, and given him life. Only heaven knows where Eutychus went from there, but one thing I am certain of, he was never the same after the saving grace of God.

And so it is with us. At least it should be. When a person understands where he would be without Christ, that his hope is found only in Christ, that the gospel has radically resurrected him—when that truth hits home—it ought to change the way he lives. How sad it would be for us to learn that Eutychus went on to have a nice family and a nice career but found his place in hell. Could it be said that there are people in the church who have witnessed the power of God and yet remained altogether unchanged?

My children are going to grow up, just like yours. And when they do, they are going to start asking the really hard questions. I know what I have been taught, but has this faith
made any difference to my dad, to my mom? Have they been transformed by the power of God’s saving grace?

- **This miracle story provides principles for Christian worship.**

Now, we have to be careful here, because this passage was not meant to teach us how to have worship. Let’s not stretch this too far. In other words, this doesn’t teach that we should always have worship on the third floor of a house, that we should always use lamps and not light bulbs, that we should have sermons that proceed to midnight. We would be foolish to make those the principles for our worship since other places in the Bible picture worship taking place in other ways and forms.

Nevertheless, there are some principles for public worship that we would be wise to apply today.

- **The church took the Lord’s Supper regularly.**

V. 7 states that the church came together on the first day of the week to break bread. That phrase means the Supper, Communion. This was an act of thankfulness as they celebrated the broken body of Jesus and the resurrection he proved from the dead.

Do you ever just marvel at the fact that you serve a Risen Savior? When the stress of a work week multiplies, when you and your wife have disagreements, when your children face problems at school, it is healthy exercise to take the Lord’s Supper and remember once again, that your biggest problem in the world has been solved. Death has been swallowed up in victory. That early church never lost the power of that truth, and neither should we. When Englewood takes the Lord’s Supper, it should be a meaningful worship experience, not an excuse to skip town.

The Lord’s Supper, Baptism, these are two dramatized versions of the gospel and they are essential to the life and health of the church.

- **Paul took his teaching responsibility seriously.**

We have absolutely no hint in this passage that Paul ever apologized for teaching too much. Likewise, the church today needs to hear this message. The teaching ministry is the foundation for the church and the greatest responsibility. Our Youth minister, Dave Jackson, his greatest role in the Warehouse is teach our kids truth. Michael Elliott and Billy Cantrell, their greatest role with children is to impress upon them the truths of God. Brent Lay, our pastor over the Prime Timers, his role is first and foremost to expose the group to sound teaching.

Take my role, here is a short list of the activities of a pastor:

- **Counseling**
- **Writing letters of Recommendation**
- **Leading Staff Meetings**
- **Building relationships with staff**
- **Attending Banquets**
- **Formulating an Annual Budget**
- **Calling on the sick**
- **Responding to Email**
Serving in the Community  
Reading books on leadership  
Returning Phone Calls  
Raising Money for Building Projects  
Deciding What To Build  
Creative Planning and Thinking  
Preaching and Praying  
Writing articles for publications  
Trouble Shooting Programs  
Dealing with Staff Conflict  
Attending Conferences  
Attending Committee Meetings

Please hear me. I’m not whining about the vast responsibilities related to my profession. You all have jobs where there is more work than there is time. Pastors aren’t the only ones that spin plates and struggle in prioritizing tasks.

But the New Testament is very clear about the primary purpose for Senior Pastors. We are called to preach and to teach. We are responsible for making all things second to the task of gospel proclamation. For this reason, the first deacons were called in Acts 7. Some of the widows were not being properly cared for and the apostles said, “God has not called us to that ministry. He has called us to the Ministry of the Word and to prayer.” Does that not sound cocky? It does at first, but those men knew that the church can do without many things, but one thing it must have is content. Today we call it “meat.” The church must have something to say, and that burden falls on the shoulders of the preacher.

Paul, even though I made a few jokes about his long-windedness, you have to admire the serious nature of his teaching ministry. Even if it took staying up all night long, he was willing to teach the truth and to supply the people with a foundation that they could stand on.

Here is the problem with the American Church today. Most pastors spend more time on the phone than they do in their study. And I have been guilty of that some weeks. Many pastors do this every week. Not all of them, but most of them. They are sacrificing time in Scripture saturation so that they can have a long lunch with a deacon or another day of planning with the staff. Listen, those things are important, but they are not as important as the man of God coming forth on Sunday with something worthy of undivided attention.

I can promise you that Paul never said on that long Sunday night, “I’m so sorry to keep you all out so late on a school night.” No! The substance of his message was so vital to their souls that even sleep could be placed in a subservient position to the Scriptures and their application.

Last week, I attended a conference at Union where the future of the Southern Baptist Convention was being discussed. Over and over, the sad statistics were offered. Most of our churches are dying or they are dead. Some remain vibrant, most are headed to the real estate auction. Why is that? It’s impossible to say that it’s all because of one thing. But if I had to throw in my theory. I believe that the church is losing its message. Too much emphasis on programming and not enough emphasis on preaching. Pastors are not CEOs, they are not Long Range Planners, they
are not conflict resolutionists, they are not architects nor are they builders. Pastors were given by God to the Church to be preachers, teachers, and proclaimers.

And all through Paul’s ministry, he beat that drum about the power of Spirit filled preaching. So Paul says to Timothy:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. 3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. 5 But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

2 Tim. 4:1-8

Do you know what it takes to produce a powerful sermon? Here is what it takes. It takes a call by God. Most preachers have that. It takes a prolonged period in isolation. It takes a fierce commitment to concentration.

The reason I have an assistant that sits in the front office of my office is that the power of God on Sunday morning is dependant upon the unbroken concentration of the preacher throughout the week. I thank God for the staff people, the deacons, and the laypeople who understand the serious responsibility of teaching and preaching. Paul didn’t see Timothy as a manager. He didn’t see Timothy as a counselor. He didn’t see Timothy as an administrator. He saw Timothy as a preacher.

May God help every pastor in our convention to grasp the power of the pulpit.