

Acts 20

Read Acts 20:1-6: This chapter can be read like any other chapter in the bible and memorized. To be transformative, you have to somehow experience that reality. We read about Paul being hunted by those under the influence of the Spirit of Antichrist in so many ways. Today, I woke up to concerns about the spread of Islam in our country and around the world. I felt concerns over all of the insurrections in our own nation. It made me uncomfortable enough to start praying. At the same time, I know that this pain and pressure is serving to expand the Iranian Church and the Messianic Jewish faith.

Today we see resistance to basic morality in our land. The haters of good have compasses that no longer point to true north. The Bible describes how those who persecute us think they are somehow justified. It is ironic how the very religious Jews were used by the Devil to attack Paul at every success. That is the same pattern for our lives. Spiritual success will meet the opposition. It is even more interesting how God uses these attacks to propel the gospel even further and faster. We even see the same phenomenon in Iran today. The more dangerous that life becomes to Christians in Iran, the more people who become saved, and the more that the believers become emboldened.

The plot to kill Paul in Greece was undoubtedly spiritual warfare; but it propelled them onward to accelerate up to God's hidden agenda for this group. Paul could never settle in for long. He had to keep moving. Paul had to keep adding helpers and overseers as he was prohibited from going back to certain places. This all added to the faith-multiplier effect.

We all want to live in peace as we go about our business. It can feel alarming to read about how the early disciples risked their lives and how they were abused. Paul was surrounded by treachery. Would I lose my composure if it were me with a target on my back?

been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in

danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ *I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.* ²⁸ *Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11)*

These challenges increase the frequency and fervency of our prayers.

I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ *who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,* ³⁴ *quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.* ³⁵ *Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.* ³⁶ *Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.* ³⁷ *They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—* ³⁸ *the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. (Hebrews 11)*

These truths about spiritual resistance and strongholds against progress have individual and national implications. It is not hard to see what the world without Christ looks like comparatively. We, in America, live in a culture of life and truth, not death. Islam is a culture of death. It is Satanic and abusive. We are finding all kinds of pervasive government fraud and voter fraud. Transgenderism is bringing in a culture of confusion.

Spiritual warfare is real. Nobody wants to be a martyr. The demons want to persuade you to delay spiritual priorities, or instead, just do something else. Spiritual warfare usually manifests itself through mere doubts, fears, anxiety and anger. Occasionally, it can include the loss of property, or personal injury. Reading Foxes Book of Martyrs or watching Islamic terrorists imprisoning or torturing Christians is enough to keep most people from even considering being put to the hazard. When God calls a person into that theater of engagement there is an extreme motivation and focus on the work at hand. The resistance is just *white*

noise. Overwhelming opposition results in much more prayer. That is how we become strong in our weaknesses.

It occurs to me that any time that I have been consumed with excitement for something which entails risks that they do not consume my thinking. Paul and the others were so consumed with joy and excitement, that the incarcerations and threats were almost like an expected distraction or a mere side effect to their quest.

The clamor and conflict in Paul's life that follows him may not be too different than what we see following President Trump. He has had 4 death threat attempts on his life and he endures daily harsh criticisms. He is undeterred as he is focused on an end result. We too must be satisfied on a deep level to see men saved and growing in grace.

Paul took traveling companions including: Sopater from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus of Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy, and Tychius and Trophimus of Asia. Why did these men not stay in their home churches? Was Paul training them? They seemed to all know that this was Paul's last outing. He was going to Jerusalem fully knowing what awaits him there.

Read Acts 20:7-12: This is a picture of an ongoing home fellowship. Paul sees all kinds of problems and opportunities in the churches. He also knows that his time on earth is about done. It is concerning to Paul to know that he is leaving his sheep amidst so many wolves.

There is a lengthy meeting of believers that goes until late at night. This gathering in a home over the word and prayer may have been a typical church setting. Note that their gathering is on the first day of the week; not the sabbath. The church met on Sundays; while the Jews met on Saturdays. Jesus rose from the dead, on Sunday, so that is logical. I think of Sunday as the last day of the week, but it is the first. Even so, these dedicated days of the week are not the main point. We should connect with God every day; not just on Sundays. The weekly gathering should be just a minimum. Ironically, Paul had to double-down on getting away from all of the appointed and ceremonial dates; while still keeping them holy. They are good, but every day should be a day of prayer and worship and the word.

The actual event or the sacrament is not the end-all. It is a representation of the reality behind it.

⁸ However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. ⁹ But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? ¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years. ¹¹ I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. (Galatians 4:8-11)

Have we lost or gained something with a big corporate church?

Comparison: Home Fellowship Church vs Megachurch

Size & Community

- Home fellowship — Plus: Small, close-knit community; deeper personal relationships and accountability.
- Home fellowship — Minus: Limited social diversity and fewer people to connect with.
- Megachurch — Plus: Large, diverse congregation; many opportunities to meet new people.
- Megachurch — Minus: Risk of anonymity; harder to form deep personal bonds.

Worship & Style

- Home fellowship — Plus: Informal, participatory worship; flexible liturgy tailored to the group.
- Home fellowship — Minus: Less professional production, fewer musical/technical resources.
- Megachurch — Plus: High-quality music, production, and polished teaching.
- Megachurch — Minus: Worship can feel consumer-oriented or scripted.

Teaching & Theology

- Home fellowship — Plus: Interactive study, contextual discussion, rapid doctrinal correction within group.
- Home fellowship — Minus: Teaching depth varies; potential for theological imbalance if leadership is untrained.
- Megachurch — Plus: Access to experienced pastors, diverse teaching series, guest speakers.
- Megachurch — Minus: Teaching may prioritize broad appeal over depth; less chance for direct Q&A.

Leadership & Accountability

- Home fellowship — Plus: Shared leadership, relational accountability, quicker responsiveness.
- Home fellowship — Minus: Limited oversight; leadership gaps or dependency on a few individuals.
- Megachurch — Plus: Professional staff, structure, volunteer training, safeguarding policies.
- Megachurch — Minus: Bureaucracy, slower feedback, potential for centralized power.

Home fellowships have been a major plus for our family. They more closely connected us with other believers. It also made us more available to them. Our friend group changed from old school friends to our home fellowship group. That social transformation revolutionized our family and our spiritual trajectory.

Read Acts 20:13-27: Paul's message in general, is to re-tell the Old Testament in a Jesus-centric way, so that the gospel fits, and the combination of both testaments makes sense. Paul has many places to visit and set things in order. He is like a man on a bicycle going from place to place. Now he is now in his final church visitation circuit. All of the believers seem to know what treachery awaits Paul in Jerusalem. Somehow Paul is more focused on getting the church squared away before he leaves this earth. You might think that this is a solemn death march, but no. The Holy Spirit is giving him overwhelming joy.

This is like watching a plate spinning act. There are always some spots starting into a dangerous wobble. We are seldom in control; but God is always in control. Paul is expediting his journey to get back to Jerusalem; where he knows that he will be arrested. He is accelerating to his end as the church leader. This is not normal for men to embrace their demise. Paul knew in advance that when he arrived in Jerusalem, he would be incarcerated and never see these friends and associates again. That really does not seem to get to him. Paul wants to get the maximum reward in heaven and move the football forward as far as possible for the team. He wants to do whatever he can to shore up and build the church now as his crowning achievement.

The envious religious Jews have followed him all over; doing whatever they could to dissuade him from preaching the gospel. They had a hatred that drove them to break the law and mischaracterize the facts to set up Paul's imprisonment. Now Paul was going straight into *the lion's den*, just like Jesus did for the cross. It was almost as if Paul was *stretching out his neck for those chains* as a badge of honor. Today, the church needs more boldness, so God has likewise allowed there to be threats on our horizon, to keep us focused. It is easier to understand by visualizing a Christian who is not really doing too much Kingdom work being afraid of persecution, as compared to a hard charging saint who is being used to change a lot of lives. The risk is secondary, unless that is all that you have to think about.

For the Lord God helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed. ⁸He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me. ⁹Behold, the Lord God helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? (Isaiah 50)

¹²Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; ¹³but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. (1 Peter 4)

The question of how we too can be bolder may not ultimately be the question. It may be how we can love Jesus more and be that we become more consumed with spiritual things. One way requires too much human effort. The other way does not even involve us at all.

⁷ But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, ⁹ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; ¹¹ in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3)

Paul is a fan of athletic competitions. We also know that he is very competitive by nature. He does not just want *the participation t-shirt*. He wants a spiritual prize in heaven. Catholicism and good old American world views would say that all that matters is that we put in our best effort. Paul is saying that we need to pay attention, and make our effort count in the lives of others.

His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' (Matthew 25:21)

²⁴ Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. ²⁵ And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. ²⁶ Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9)

Read Acts 20:28-38: It is a proven fact that things that come easy or cheap are not as appreciated as much as things that we really struggle for. Paul dumped his career and life plans for the church. He spent it all. He sees the attacks on the church in a very personal way, just like Jesus.

There are two main ways that the church is attacked. The persecutions scattered the church and ultimately emboldened the saints. And the more insidious strategy of putting false pastors in place.

Paul knew that he had been used by God to get the church to this stage; but that oversight was about to end. We think that the world cannot go on without us until it does.

Paul sees evil men longing to take the spotlight and corrupt the gospel according to their own interests. Paul had no allusions about the insurrectionists trying to take hold in the church. The devil's fake believers will be seeking to take over the message and the pulpit. Paul desperately tells all believers who get to see this memo that they must become personally *bullet proof* from Satan's counterfeiters. We must be able to identify manmade and unscriptural messages, posing as being biblically inspired. Only the Holy Spirit can give us *x-ray vision* to see and smell God's heart and intentions being present or absent. What is obvious and truth to us is abhorrent to the unbelievers.

³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; ⁴ and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. ⁵ But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Timothy 4)

We memorize scripture; which is good, but that is not everything. It is good to the degree that you use it to honor and love on God and your neighbor, not just soothe yourself.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a worker who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. ¹⁶ But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness. (2 Timothy 2)

Paul draws on sports to emphasize that this world believes that the *ends justify the means*. We must operate *in bounds* and according to God's rules for this evangelistic effort to count. Man makes it about winning; but God makes it about redemption and healing.

Sometimes the church is not that spiritual of a place. When I reflect on my own spiritual journey, I too have seen too much humanity from the pulpit. I was raised in a synod of the Lutheran Church, which was supposed to be fairly solid. As I got into High School that synod of the Lutheran Church decided that it was a good idea to allow homosexual pastors and bishops lead. Wrong! When we got married and moved out of town we found another Lutheran Church that seemed to be the best of the local batch. The message was the best in the area. I eventually got involved

as an elder of that church, and was a member on the elder committee to hold our pastor accountable. I discovered all kinds of politics and backstabbing that had been taking place for years. Like a wolf, the pastor had eaten many sheep over the years. He outmaneuvered his detractors one by one, until he had nobody left except those who would not resist his abuses. Unfortunately, I was eventually the person who confirmed that it was time for this wolf to leave our flock. I had a Luthern Bishop scream at me because it was so hard to find a replacement pastor these days.

I have visited various Pentecostal and other denominations which were really focused on spiritual gifts. So much so, that the pastors would try to shame or call out whoever was reluctant to *get into the act*. I pointed out that speaking in tongues is supposed to be accompanied by an interpreter, in a general assembly. That did not go well. Unfortunately, there was too much power-of-suggestion and group-hypnotism taking place. The gifts are tools for the benefit of the body of Christ (church). They are not medals of standing, or indications of salvation.

I was approached by some Church of Christ, Boston people who supposedly just wanted to share the word and pray together. I agreed to my chagrin. That lead-in was a front for heavy shepherding and a cult-like control over all members. They even pressured the men to listen to the pastor more than their wife. The pastor is elevated almost to a god like status. They also told me way back then, that if my wife was not saved, then, automatically I am not saved. I reminded them that even Jesus brothers did not believe for a while. That infuriated them; and they were absolutely not looking for truth...just submission. You were made to feel guilty if you did not go along with making their elder *your personal scheduler*, and a co-decision maker. Even the regional church overseer guy came in to try to shame me into kneeling to his arguments. I pointed out that to them this seemed to be about winning the argument, not being right.

All said, you really, really need to know your bible forward and backwards as well as the intents that God has shared. Paul is gone, but his notes and direction from God is still with us. We need it for today just as much as the early church needed it.