Sunday, July 26, 2026

LEAD FROM THE FRONT

Acts 20-21

- If you were here the week before last, we finished up Acts chapter 19, in which we saw Demetrius the silversmith, incite a riot in Ephesus because Paul had been leading so many people to Jesus that it was beginning to effect the idol making business
- The town clerk eventually came in and settled down and broke up the crowd and chapter 20 begins by saying: ***"After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia. When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus. These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas, but we sailed away from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days." -Acts 20:1-6 (ESV)***
- It's an awesome team that Paul has assembled here because we see people represented from almost all of the places that he had been on this 3rd missionary journey.
- **MAP** you can see that he has guys that are represented from the 3 major regions that he has been ministering in—Galatia, Asia, and Macedonia
- So now, we see that he is not just reaching new believers, but he is training up leaders—

and his team is growing, it's diverse, its a testament to how much the Gospel is reaching the world!

- Then while they are in Troas we see the believers gathering together for church on Sunday: ***"On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted."-Acts 20:7-12 (ESV)***
- Now, it's ironic—the name Eutychus means "lucky"
  - And some will say that he sure is lucky that Paul was there
  - But in my mind—it was Paul's fault that he was in that position in the first place
  - I was literally reading commentaries this week, using this as a warning for people who fall asleep in church
  - But Paul was preaching until midnight!—Now, their church services would have been evening services because the Jewish calendar day began at sundown not sun-up…so our Saturday night would be their Sunday morning
  - But even so—if the service started at 6 or 7pm, that's still a solid 5 or 6 hours that Paul has been preaching!

- And poor Eutychus has been trying—there's so many people in the room, the torches are making it warm and sucking the oxygen out of the room
- So he climbs up to a window to get some air and some space
  - And then a nice little breeze is now hitting him, and he's comfortable
  - And if we're going to be honest—Paul was not the most dynamic speaker
  - Paul himself told the Corinthians, ***"…when I came to you, I did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God." -1 Corinthians 2:1***
  - He knew that some people would say—For they say, ***"His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." -2 Corinthians 10:10***
  - But Paul also said—***"Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things." -2 Corinthians 11:6***
- You see, people back then were just like people today…and we have a tendency to focus more on style than content.
- Or, as I'll put it: **POWER > TALENT**
  - Paul may not have been the most talented speaker—but he was definitely the most powerful one
  - The power was made evident whenever he just declares that Eutychus is ok, got himself a snack and then he keeps talking all the way until the sun comes up!
- Thousands and thousands of people have come to the saving knowledge of Christ through Paul's un-dynamic sermons and speeches

- But you know why? Because every word he said, and every aspect of his ministry was accompanied by the Power of the Holy Spirit
  - Too many people, too many Christians will set out on a search for the most talented worship team that fits their preferred style—without a thought of the content of the worship
  - Then of course we'll look for the most dynamic and talented communication style rather than focusing on biblical accuracy
  - I can't tell you how many times I will refer some of the best bible teachers in the world or even history to some people but they just come back with "Eh, he's boring"
- We have to break out of this entertainment focused culture that we have had in the church for almost an entire generation—and focus on the power of the Gospel more than our preference in style
- *On July 8th 1741—In Enfield, Connecticut Jonathan Edwards delivered one of the most influential sermons in history that became the defining moment of the First Great Awakening*
  - *As he preached, so many people began to be overcome with conviction that there was groaning and weeping all over the room—it got to be so much that Edwards had to pause his sermon, while another pastor prayer*
  - *Once it calmed down, he started preaching again—and throughout the message, it was reported—he used no humor, told no personal stories, he kept his head down, just read off the notes in a monotone manner—used a quiet calm voice the entire time*
  - *But yet by the end of the message people all around the room were crying out, "What must I do to be saved!?"*
- How could such a mild mannered delivery, produce such a response?
- Because, its the Power of the Holy Spirit that moves people to repentance, that deepens our knowledge of God, that changes our hearts

- Now there is nothing wrong with talent or a dynamic style—we saw that Apollos had that. He was excellent in speech, he was a dynamic communicator and he was powerful or mighty in the scriptures!
    - And some will say, “yea, well isn’t it better to have talent and power?!”
    - And the answer is no. It’s not better and it’s not worse—because the talent is irrelevant
    - No pastor or communicator, no matter how talented or dynamic, has any power to change the heart and mind of any human being—only the Power of the Holy Spirit can do that
- And the Spirit moves in the midst of presented Truth
    - And when we desire truth more than entertainment or stylistic or cultural preference—we will experience the Spirit move in power in our lives, in spite of the flawed human beings that He uses
- <u>So Paul pulls his all nighter with the church at Troas, and then he heads out of town hoping to get to Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost</u>
    - Then he gets to Miletus, which is 20 miles or so south of Ephesus—and he sends for the elders of the church at Ephesus to meet him down there for one last rendezvous
    - And here we see the only prolonged sermon or message in the book of Acts that is directed at believers—every other one had been directed at still practicing Jews, unbelieving gentiles, or government officials
    - But now he is addressing believers: more specifically Christian leaders
- ***“And when they came to him, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was***

profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." -Acts 20:18-21 (ESV)

- Paul indeed was the lead shepherd of the new testament church—especially among the Gentiles
- And last week we talked about Jesus being the Good Shepherd, and Paul is doing everything he can to lead like Jesus
- We talked about the unique way that Shepherd's lead their flocks is that they lead from the front.
  - They go before their sheep, they're the first to walk the path—never taking the sheep somewhere that they haven't already been themselves
  - That is how we as Christians are supposed to live
- **CHRISTIANS LEAD FROM THE FRONT**
  - And that is how Paul led, and how he is encouraging the Ephesian elders to lead
- Now, you might say—well the word Shepherd, elder, overseer, pastor they're all interchangeable, so this doesn't apply to me
  - However, you may not be holding that office—but everyone is still leading someone somewhere
- Pastor Chip Ingram once said one of my favorite quotes—I love it so much because it is so simple yet so convicting. He said, ***"You are the greatest Christian that someone knows" -Chip Ingram***
  - Whether you have been following Christ for 50 years, 5 years, or 5 minutes—there is someone looking at your life and you are their biggest insight to Christianity
  - Whether it be a child, a friend, a coworker, or someone watching your life from a distance—you are leading someone somewhere, the question is: where are you leading them?

- If we are going to lead from the front, we have to be able to live the life that we would encourage others to live: both privately and publicly
  - Paul said confidently—look at how I lived among you from day one
- He made sure that his example and his testimony never wavered
- He lists off some ways that **Paul led from the front**:
  - **He Led By Example**
  - **He Served the Lord—Even When it was Hard**
  - **Spoke the Whole Truth—Publicly and Privately to All People**
- Paul could effectively encourage them how to live this out because he lived it himself
  - *He said, "Look at how I lived among you from day 1—Look at how I served the Lord with humility (I never made it about me) with tears (I put my whole heart into this) and with trials (even when it got hard. Even when people rejected me, lied about me, started rumors about me, rioted because of me—even when they tried to kill me) I still served the Lord with everything I got*
  - *I still spoke the whole truth to everyone who would listen—I didn't just tell people what they wanted to hear to make them feel good*
  - *I didn't just bash people over the head with how bad they are*
  - *I let them very clearly know the necessity of repentance—to acknowledge our sin and our need for a savior*
  - *And I let them know about the free gift of salvation offered through faith—to all who would repent and believe"*
- And this is how confident he is in his example:
- ***"Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not***

shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." -Acts 20:26 (ESV)

- He is so confident in how faithfully he shared the Gospel—that if anyone goes to hell, it's not on him
  - Man, can you imagine being able to say that?
  - *I remember the first time I heard this verse: I was interning at a church in Columbus GA and we were doing a backpack drive—and I was asked to take a lady aside and share the gospel with her*
  - *And I froze—I didn't know what to say I felt awkward, and someone else had to do it*
  - *And I felt so small—I was beating myself up about it, and I went to talk to the Pastor and he quoted me what Paul said here in verse 26*
  - *And he didn't say it to make me further acknowledge my failure—rather he encouraged me to use it as motivation to never let it happen again—to never miss another opportunity—to be prepared and confident to share the Gospel with anyone, anywhere, at anytime*
- Are we prepared for that?
  - We talked a little bit about this at camp—and some of the boys wanted to know what some first steps would be and I encouraged them to not wait until they were in a situation to have a response ready
  - Go ahead now, and have a short written out testimony of what the Lord had done and is doing in your life
  - If you need to share the Gospel with someone—what are you going to say? Go ahead and write down what you would say
  - How are you going to handle the hard questions? What if someone asks you, "If God is so good, why do bad things happen to good people?"— "If God if God loves all, why can't someone be gay and be a Christian at the same time?"

- How are you going to answer those questions? Work through those now, and be prepared for it
- And its good to write these things out—not to carry around and have a script ready….but to just familiarize yourself with it so you'll be the best prepared

- But you have to be able to live it out—not just say it

- ***"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears." -Acts 20:28-31 (ESV)***

- **LEAD FROM THE FRONT:**
  - **Check Yourself First**
  - **Remember Who the Church Belongs To**
- Paul is intentional about telling them that they need to pay careful attention to themselves—and then to the flock
- You have to lead from the front—you can't lead someone somewhere you haven't already been yourself
  - I have Ezekiel 3:10-11 on a sticky note in my office that I can't help but see throughout the entire duration of my sermon prep and it says: ***"Son of man, let all My words sink deep into your own heart first. Listen to them carefully for yourself. Then go to your people…" -Ezekiel 3:10-11 (NLT)***
  - My prayer for every single sermon that I give — is that the Lord would use it to Encourage, Equip, and Convict His people

- But I have to pray that over myself first—I have to be encourage, equipped, and convicted all week long, while putting a message together if I'm going to be able to deliver this word to you
- I gotta check myself first—and most importantly remember who this Church belongs too

- Paul tells the leaders to never forget who bought the church with His blood!
  - He is Lord, He is King, He is Master
  - And we have to remember that, because the wolves are coming—Jesus warned that this would happen when He left. In Matthew 7 He said to beware of those who came dressed as sheep but were actually ravenous wolves
  - And Paul knew that he was leaving and not coming back, and he has the same warning
- And the Good Shepherd has empowered others to shepherd the church—which Paul had been doing so well
  - But now He is leaving and new shepherds will take his place—and the wolves knew the reputation Paul and how he wasn't one to be messed with
  - But when the wolves see a new shepherd directing the flock—well, they're going to test the limits of the new guy
  - They're going to see if he is anything like the last one or if he's softer and weaker
  - And the goal isn't to be like the last shepherd, the goal is to be like the Good Shepherd—that's why Paul told the Corinthians "Imitate me, as I imitate Christ"
  - And Paul tells them how this is possible:

- ***"And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." -Acts 20:32 (ESV)***
  - All you need is God and His Word

- He is what builds you up, he is what keeps you strong, He is what keeps you focused and alert
- Then Paul rounds out this message in verse 33

- ***"I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" -Acts 20:33-35 (ESV)***
- It's interesting, because nowhere in the Gospels is Jesus quoted saying this phrase
- But that doesn't discount what Paul said, because not everything that Jesus said and did was able to be recorded.
  - John said there were so many things that Jesus did, if they were written one by one, "I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (Jn 21:25)
  - And obviously this was a familiar quote to the believers because Paul tells them to remember, to think back on what Jesus said
- And Jesus said that the most blessed life that you can live, is one that is more focused on how you can give through your life— rather than what you can get in this life
- Jim Elliot famously quoted in his journal, ***"He is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."***
  - We Christians are to be the most generous people on the planet—we are to give of our time, give of our treasures, give of our talent
  - Everything that we are blessed with we are to live opened handed with because the only thing that we can take with us into Heaven anyway is our salvation

- Paul then says goodbye to a group of people that He had given so much of himself to over the years
  - It's an emotional time, there's a lot of weeping Luke says—because he told them that they probably wouldn't see his face again
- Back in verse 22 he said: ***"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again." -Acts 20:22-25 (ESV)***
- So it seems Paul doesn't really know why, or what all is going to happen—he just knows that he has to go to Jerusalem. He says he is "constrained by," or "bound by" the Spirit to go
- And it's interesting because in chapter 21—we see him make his way to Tyre and verse 4 says: ***"And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem" -Acts 21:4 (ESV)***
- Then they get to Caesarea and they stay with Philip—and verse 10 says: ***"While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard***

this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem." -Acts 21:10-12 (ESV)

- So what's the deal here? The Spirit is telling Paul to go—but telling other people to tell him not to go?? What's going on here??
- You see, the Spirit in each case revealed to Paul and the others that affliction and imprisonment were waiting for him in Jerusalem
  - And because they all loved Paul, they didn't want Paul to go through that! They wanted to keep him around to keep him safe
- <u>But Paul was confident that the Lord still wanted him to go for a reason</u>
  - And the Lord wasn't hiding anything from Paul or the others, it's like the Lord was being so up front with Paul and asking him, "You sure you want to do this?"
  - God wasn't giving Paul any reason to say, "This isn't what I signed up for! I didn't see this coming!"
  - God wanted Paul to be very clear about what he was getting into
- And through all of this—God really is giving Paul an opportunity to be even more confident in his calling—and you can hear this confidence in the following verses:
- ***"Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done." -Acts 21:13-14 (ESV)***
- This takes me back to the garden of gethsemane, where Jesus knew everything that was ahead of Him—He knew the pain, the torture, the affliction that He was about to endure on the cross
- And He prayed—"Lord, please if there is any way! Remove this cup from me!—but, nevertheless, not My will but Yours be done"

- I love that Luke didn't shy away from being one of those that was trying to deter him from going
  - And I don't think that he and the others were being faithless or doubters in what God could do
  - I think they just loved Paul—no one wanted to see him suffer. But Paul was ready to, and they all got to the point where they left it all where it belongs, in the Lord's hands.
  - So Paul makes his way to Jerusalem.
- ***"When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry." -Acts 21:17-19 (ESV)***
- Now, it had been 5 years since the last time that Paul had seen James and the brothers in Jerusalem
  - And when it says he related one by one the things that God had done—this means he gives a thorough report to them:
  - It could have gone something like this:
- *"So, when we started off on this 3rd missionary journey, we left Antioch and we headed for Derbe—it had now been 10 years since we started a gathering there, and there are such strong believers there now. I have Gaius with me from Derbe, and he can tell you, that these people are firm in their faith and they are bringing more and more to Christ every single day!*
- *And you remember young Timothy from Lystra, you know, the grandson of Eunice—well he's not so young anymore! He's turned out to be a remarkable man of God. He's been my right hand man on these journeys and I believe that*

the Lord is going to set him up as the Lead Pastor in Ephesus

- *Because man, let me tell you about Ephesus: We started off in the synagogues, you know as we do. And it went well for a few months until the Jews started to get mad, as they do.*
- *So we left, and somehow the Lord opened up a door for us to rent out the Hall of Tyrannus everyday from 11-4. And people would come every day for two years, and the people, who were from all over were hearing the Gospel and coming to faith!*
- *Then they would take the Gospel out to the smaller towns and they were starting churches in places like Smyrna, Sardis, Thyatira, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Colossae….there are at least 9 churches that we know of that have started that I haven't even gotten to visit!*
    - *I can't believe that we were able to do that for 2 years! I made friends with some of the Asiarchs, the people and leadership of the town loved us and I'm telling you, it was like all of Asia got to hear the Gospel*
    - *Tychicus and Trophimus I brought with me from Asia—they can tell you all about what is going on in their hometowns!*
    - *Eventually the silversmiths incited a riot against us—but that was because so many people were coming to faith, and turning away from magic and idols that it was hurting their business! How crazy is that?!*
    - *They literally burned 50,000 pieces of silver worth of dark magic books*
- *Then when we got out of there, we visited the churches in Macedonia—and Philippi, I'll tell ya, is still the most generous group of people that I have ever met*
    - *They are being persecuted probably more so than any of our churches, they have probably some of the lowest funding—yet they went above and beyond anyone else when it came to helping you guys here in Jerusalem—and that church is flourishing*

- *Then we went and visited Thessalonica and they have such strong leadership now. Aristarchus and Secundus have been a part of such a great work of the Gospel there— that we wanted to bring them along for you all to meet them and hear their stories.*
- *And Sopater can tell you all about what's going on in Berea—I'm telling you, those Bereans, I don't know if I've ever seen a group of people so dedicated to the Word of God in my life!*
- *It's so awesome to see what God is doing through the Gentiles—it seems everywhere we go we can find brothers and sisters in Christ*
- *Just on the way here: We go to Troas and we had a church service that lasted all night long—one kid fell asleep and fell from out of a 3rd story window—but he's fine*
    - *The Ephesian elders met us down in Miletus*
    - *We get to Tyre and there was a group of disciples there that we spent a week with*
    - *And of course we get to Caesarea with Philip and his daughters—it's such a Spirit filled group of people*
    - *And they didn't want me to come here—but I had to*
- *Don't you see James? —The Gospel has brought the nations to Jesus! We are living out what God promised to Abraham when He said, "In you all of the nations of the world will be blessed"*
- *And just look at all of the nations that are represented in this group here—this is why we do what we do. And I can't stop until the Lord takes me home!"*
- It probably did Paul's heart so much good to be able to just recap everything that he had seen God do over the past couple years, just to further encourage his spirit before he walks into a difficult situation
    - Just to remind his heart and mind of God's goodness and faithfulness—and being able

to share it with other believers that would be just as encouraged by it

- Luke says in verse 20: ***"And when they heard it, they glorified God." -Acts 21:20a (ESV)***
- They didn't glorify Paul! They did not give him the credit that was due to God alone
- They also weren't jealous of Paul or argue over ministry tactics and secondary doctrine—or have skeptical conversation about what God was or wasn't doing
  - They simply glorified God for the work that was His
  - The Gospel was reaching the nations—people are being saved at a rapid rate—God is working in incredible ways and they just praised Him for it
- <u>We have to remember what we are doing this for. By "this" I mean the Christian life.</u>
  - That includes church, our community, and how we live our faith out loud
- And a lot of professing Christians will not actually live out the Christian life because we wrongly prioritize who we are doing this for.
  - The typical western believer will commonly think that their faith is firstly about them—secondly about God—then thirdly, if at all, about others
  - When the reality is—our faith is first and foremost about God—then about others—and ourselves last
- The Christian life is mainly about God, His Glory, His Work, His Kingdom. We live our lives in order to glorify Him and praise Him with all that we say and do
  - It is not about us feeling good about ourselves or becoming happier
  - It's about becoming faithful to follow our Savior in this vapor of a life
  - And being faithful to share Him with others
- We talked about this a little bit with the youth at camp—and we were hearing a common

theme of those who would read their bible for a little bit, a few weeks or a few months, but then their prayer lives and time in the word would dwindle

- So the consensus normally is—just make a schedule be more intentional spend more time, get back to it
- But the same pattern will keep on happening if we don't know what we're doing it for

- Because the majority of believers today are praying and reading their bibles to check off a box—to be able to say that they did it—so that they will be in a better head space for the day—so they'll feel better about themselves
  - But if your primary purpose for spending time with the Lord is yourself—you're not going to get anywhere
  - We spend time with the Lord to glorify Him, to learn more about Him, to fall deeper in love with Him
  - And anything that the Lord ever teaches you about His word or about Himself—He teaches you so that you will teach someone else
  - He blesses you—so that you can be a blessing to someone else
  - He gives grace to you so that you will give grace to someone else
- Paul said to the Ephesians: ***"..you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you" -Ephesians 3:2 (ESV)***
- He said to the Colossians: ***"I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known" -Colossians 1:25 (ESV)***
- Whatever God gives to you—you are to give to others
- You know, Christian attributes are often referred to as "fruit"

- Jesus said you will know them by their fruit—Paul referred to the “fruit of the Spirit”
- But you know, the health of a fruit is determined by its ability to nourish others
  - Fruit is never for the vine or the tree itself or the fruit itself—it is for the benefit of others
  - So when we work through the Fruit of the Spirit that Paul gave the Galatians: It’s not about our love, our joy, our peace, our patience, our kindness, our goodness, our faithfulness, our gentleness, our self-control
  - No—it’s about someone else being loved — it’s about joy being contagious to others—it’s about bringing peace to others who experience nothing but chaos—It’s about others being blessed through the kindness, goodness, and gentleness, that the Lord produces in our lives
- And if other people are not benefiting from the faith that is in you—you are not effectively living the life you are supposed to live as a Christian.
- Paul reminds us of the words of Jesus: “It is more blessed to give, than to receive”
- So when we are blessed enough to receive, we will be even more blessed to give to others whatever we have received
  - The Christian life is not about obtaining—it is about giving. All that we are, and that we have for God to make us useful for His Kingdom
- That is leading from the front
- Whatever you want other people to be for you, you must first be for other people
- All because we want to emulate the Good Shepherd
- Being imitators of God as Dearly loved Children
- All in the hopes that we would be able to confidently say, “Imitate me and I imitate Christ.”