
Warning to the Wise: Learning from Eutychus's Mistake

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The downfall of Eutychus is certainly, to modern ears, a strange story, but it would have offered moral guidance to ancient readers. It exhorts them to learn from Eutychus's youthful mistakes and to avoid spiritual laxity at all costs.

In Acts 20:7-12 we encounter a fascinating story about Paul raising a young man from the dead. By this point in the book of Acts, Paul has already concluded his final work in Greece and is in the midst of saying farewell to the Christians in Asia Minor. In particular, he has already spent six and a half days in Troas, and he is down to his final night there. As a result, Paul spends his final hours in the region preaching, worshipping God, and breaking bread in an upper room amid a house-church gathering. In fact, we are told that midnight has already arrived and Paul shows no sign of stopping (20:7).

At that point, we meet Eutychus, an adolescent worshipper in the Troas congregation whose name literally means lucky or fortunate one. Unfortunately, the young man falls asleep, falls out of the window in which he sits, falls three stories to the ground, and dies. Astoundingly though, Paul goes downstairs, raises Eutychus from the dead, and then resumes his role as the leader of the all-night worship service in the upper room. Finally, we are told that Paul continues preaching until the sun comes up and that the church receives great comfort from the revitalization of Eutychus.

While interesting on many levels, this story presents us with a variety of challenging questions. For example, if we assume that the author purposefully included the story about Eutychus's resuscitation in the book of Acts, we must ask, "What might that purpose be?" Interpreters have generally concluded that the author (likely Luke) hoped Acts would shape his readers' thoughts, imaginations, and behavior. So we must ask, "How

would Luke's earliest readers have understood this particular story, and what lessons did Luke hope his readers would draw from this text?"

To answer these types of questions, biblical scholars commonly exhort conscientious readers of biblical narratives to consider two things: the cultural norms assumed by the readers of ancient narratives and the overarching storylines of the various biblical books. By reading individual narrative units within their cultural context and within their broader literary context, we often find significant clues that point us toward reliable interpretations of narrative texts.

PATTERNS OF INTERPRETATION

Some modern interpreters have read Acts 20:7-12 through a humorous lens, pointing out what happens when preachers preach too long; other interpreters have treated Eutychus's fall as a no-fault happenstance.¹ Of course, these interpreters arrive at their conclusions for good reason. Paul's theological reflections last all night. In essence, modern readers frequently feel empathy for the youthful Eutychus, reasoning that Eutychus can be excused for falling asleep during Paul's lengthy sermon. They are more likely to criticize the long-winded preacher than the youthful listener who dozes off. The difficulty, however, with these readings is that they do not readily explain why Luke included this story in the book of Acts.

Conversely, the first readers of Acts would likely have interpreted Eutychus's actions as a tragic mistake that could have and should have been prevented. Given an ancient Mediterranean milieu and a broad view of both Luke and Acts, Eutychus's fall seems to be depicted more as a downfall rather than an excusable accident. "Bad luck" is not responsible for this deadly event; Eutychus is. Eutychus, whose name means "Lucky," is fortunate only because Paul is present and able to reverse the natural repercussions of Eutychus's careless actions. Below I will describe why I think this latter interpretation of Acts 20:7-12 is likely the way Luke's first readers interpreted the text. In particular, I will show that this type of reading provides a spiritual warning for Luke's readers. Readers are encouraged to avoid Eutychus's actions and to cultivate spiritual vigilance.

ANCIENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF SLEEP

Would ancient Mediterranean peoples have thought about sleep in ways that are different from contemporary interpreters? The answer is yes in some instances. Based upon ancient Mediterranean texts, we can break down ancient conversations and thought patterns about sleep into four main categories.²

First, without a doubt and without need for further explanation, many ancient writers referred to literal, physiological sleep in their writings (e.g., Luke 8:22-25). Second, ancient writers often referred to physical death as sleep. For example, Paul speaks of "those who have fallen asleep" when he refers to those who have physically died (1 Thessalonians 4:13, cf. Acts

13:36). Third, ancient writers at times referred to the Greek god, *Hypnos* or "Sleep." Sleep overpowers unsuspecting gods and humans with physical sleep and, together with his twin brother Death, ushers the dead to the underworld (e.g., Homer, *Iliad* 14.153-360; 16.451-454, 666-682). Finally, ancient authors routinely depicted irresponsible human behavior metaphorically as sleep. For example, Jesus tells the parable of the ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1-13. The five wise bridesmaids take along additional oil for their lamps so they will be prepared for the bridegroom, who is delayed but arrives at midnight. However, the five foolish bridesmaids fall asleep and run out of oil; they are unprepared for the bridegroom's arrival and miss out on the wedding banquet. When Jesus reflects on the parable, he instructs his disciples saying, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

In Acts 20:7-12 the references to Eutychus's sleep most certainly refer to physical rest (category one). At the same time, however, Luke appears to build upon common metaphorical notions of sleep as well (category four). In particular, Eutychus's physical sleep provides a visible characterization of his spiritual laxity and irresponsible Christian behavior.

LITERARY THEMES IN LUKE AND ACTS

The overarching narratives of Luke and Acts also provide many clues and natural comparisons that help us interpret the short story found in Acts 20:7-12 as Luke's earliest

readers would have. A variety of thematic elements, verbal repetitions, and narrative clues in other Lukan passages support a negative portrait of Eutychus's fall and a positive portrait of Paul's actions in the story. I will summarize four of the most relevant Lukan literary themes below.

The first is the theme of *resuscitations*. Miraculous acts of raising a person from the dead are rare in the Bible, yet there are three

resuscitations in Luke's writings. Jesus raises a widow's son from the dead in Luke 7:11-17; Peter raises Tabitha in Acts 9:36-42; and Paul raises Eutychus from the dead in Acts 20:7-12. A good reader will not miss the parallels. As a result, the author of Acts is in no way depicting Paul in a negative light given that, apart from Jesus, Paul is one of only two people

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in the entire New Testament (and one of only four people in the Bible, cf. 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37) to perform a miracle of resuscitation. In essence, by including the miraculous resuscitations performed by Peter and Paul in Acts, Luke appears to be showing that they are in faithful continuity with Jesus. They are carrying on the work of Jesus after his death, and Jesus' spirit is at work in them. Paul's actions in Acts 20, therefore, drive home the readers' awareness that the Spirit of God is at work in and through Paul.

In both Luke and Acts, *upper rooms* provide an intimate setting for Jesus' followers. For example, in Luke 22:7-38 Jesus communes and dines with his disciples in an upper room on the night of his arrest. Later in Acts 1:13-14, Jesus' disciples have again gathered in an upper room prior to the arrival of God's Spirit. Likewise, Peter resuscitates Tabitha from the dead, whose body had been laid in an upper room in Acts 9:36-42. Finally, in Acts 20:7-12, the Christians in Troas worship God in an upper room. In all of these units, the setting connotes a context of intimacy and sincere discipleship. Yet, as we see with Judas in Luke 22:3-6, 47-48 and Eutychus in Acts 20:9, when a disciple leaves the context of an upper room, an ominous tone is introduced.

Worship is the third important literary theme. The Christians in Troas show themselves to be a faithful gathering of Jesus' followers by means of their faithful worship of God. They are breaking bread, worshipping God, and existing in unity much like we see in Acts 2. For example, the believers in Acts 2 "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles" (Acts 2:42-43). Notably, all of those elements (teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and a miracle performed by an apostle) except prayer explicitly appear again in Acts 20:7-12.

Even the imagery is significant. The lamps allow them to continue in light throughout the night while darkness has fallen outside of the upper room. The Christians in Troas prepared ahead of time for an entire night of worship and communion when they brought their lamps with them.³

The fourth theme we should notice is Luke's metaphorical use of *sleep, night, and darkness*. As with most ancient narratives that retell historical events, readers can assume that the author chose not to include many ordinary events. Rather, the author elected to include noteworthy events that contribute to the overall message of the book. For example, it is logical to assume that Jesus ate and slept on most days of his life, but Luke does not narrate those events for every twenty-four hour period. Rather, Luke highlights important or pivotal moments for his readers. Within this line of reasoning, it is interesting to note that whenever Luke does mention sleep, he primarily associates it with negative metaphorical connotations. We should not be surprised then to see Luke utilize other

terms like awake, alert, day, light, night, and darkness in conjunction with metaphorical references to sleep. As a result, for the most part, Luke's references to sleep, night, and darkness are negative themes in his writings. For example, Jesus associates the arresting mob in Luke 22:53 with "the power of darkness" and Satan's influence.⁴

One might then be tempted to assume that only daytime is associated with the work of God and nighttime is exclusively associated with the opposite, but that is not quite right. The work of God takes place both during the day and the night in Luke and Acts, but the key for humans pertains to whether they are awake or asleep during the decisive moments of salvation history. On occasion, God's will is fully realized during the nighttime hours, but only those who are awake and alert recognize and/or participate in God's will.

For example, an angel of the Lord speaks to the shepherds during the night while they are keeping watch over their sheep (Luke 2:8-20). The shepherds then immediately go to Bethlehem where they find Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus in the manger. God's servants accomplish God's will during the middle of the night, but the angel speaks to those who are alert and awake. Similarly, the prophet Anna is praised for worshipping, fasting, and praying continuously in the temple – both night and day (Luke 2:37). Notably, Jesus also spends the entire night in prayer prior to selecting his

apostles (Luke 6:12). Along these lines, exegetes have routinely noted that Jesus prays before major decisions in Luke. Yet, it is equally important to realize that Jesus provides a model for how one handles the night. Furthermore, Jesus exhorts his disciples to remain alert or awake and pray so that their hearts will not be weighed down with indulgence, drunkenness, and the worries of this life (Luke 21:34-36).

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The opposite of remaining alert and awake during the night, of course, is falling asleep. Only Luke tells us that Peter, James, and John fell asleep during the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). Presumably during the evening hours, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John onto a mountain in order to pray. While Jesus prays, his appearance transfigures and he speaks of his departure. The disciples, however, are weighed down with sleep (9:32). (In fact,

the same terminology found in Luke 9:32 appears again when sleep weighs down upon Eutychus in Acts 20:9.) Thankfully, though, the three disciples are able to witness Jesus' transfigured appearance once they awake (9:32). Of course, the most obvious example in the Gospel of Luke of the disciples' propensity to fall asleep during the night at a moment when they should pray and remain alert is found in Luke 22:39-46. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus prays that the Father might remove the cup of suffering. At the same time, Jesus twice instructs his disciples to pray that they might not come into the time of trial (22:39, 46). Yet, the disciples fail miserably by falling asleep at an important moment rather than praying. They fall asleep on a night when they should remain vigilant.

As a result, we see a pattern developing in Luke's Gospel. Luke shows us two profound examples of wide-awake vigilance at the beginning of his Gospel: the shepherds and Anna remain alert to the work of God even during the night hours. Thereafter, we also repeatedly see Jesus praying and communing with God during the night hours. On the other hand, Jesus' disciples repeatedly fail miserably throughout the Gospel. In particular, Luke frequently associates the disciples' failures with the behavior of falling sleep. The disciples sleep at pivotal moments in salvation history. They drift away into unconsciousness during the decisive moments of God's work in the world. In the Gospel, therefore, sleep often functions metaphorically to illustrate the disciples' spiritual laxity and failure.

Luke establishes a significantly different pattern regarding disciples and sleep in the book of Acts. The events narrated in Acts take place after Jesus' Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension to the right hand of the Father in heaven (Acts 1:9-11; 7:55-56). In addition, the Holy Spirit has already come upon Jesus' followers in a miraculous manner that empowers them to carry on Jesus' ministry. These pivotal events transform Jesus' disciples. For instance, Peter denies that he even knows Jesus at the end of the Gospel (Luke 22:54-62), but forty days later Peter provides the authoritative interpretation of the Pentecost events (Acts 2:14-40). Unfaithfulness has been transformed into faithfulness, and in general sleep has been transformed into vigilance.

For instance, in Acts 12:1-17, while guarded by four squadrons of soldiers during the night, Peter sleeps in a prison cell. Yet an angel of the Lord appears in the prison, wakes Peter, frees him, and guides him out of prison. In the process, Peter is easily roused and fully compliant with the angel's instructions. In the meantime, we learn that that the church in Jerusalem is simultaneously praying for Peter during this entire nighttime event (12:5, 12). In essence, Peter and the church in Jerusalem are depicted as being in tune with the will and work of God. Unlike Gethsemane, sleep does not prohibit Peter's obedience or the church's prayers. They are awake and vigilant.

Next, we see Paul's spiritual vigilance depicted by being alert to the work of God at night on two separate occasions in Acts 16. For example in Acts 16:9-10 Paul has a vision during the night of a Macedonian man asking him to help the Macedonian people. Paul interprets this vision as a call from God. Similarly, Paul and Silas are beaten, thrown in prison, and guarded by a jailer in Philippi (16:11-24). Yet at midnight, Paul and Silas are not sleeping, as one would expect. Instead, they are "praying and singing hymns to God" (16:25). While being spiritually attuned to God, a miraculous earthquake frees Paul and Silas from prison while leading the jailer to believe in the Lord Jesus. Thereafter, the jailer cleans their wounds and extends hospitality to Paul and Silas in the middle of the night (16:33-34).

THE WARNING TO THE WISE

In Acts 20:7-12 we see behaviors that fall well within the established patterns in Luke and Acts. Characterized by the marks of faithful Christian worship, we see both Paul and the Christians in Troas wide-awake, worshipping God, and breaking bread at midnight. They are in an upper room that is illuminated by lamps while darkness surrounds them on the outside. Eutychus is the only Christian who behaves otherwise. He falls asleep, which prevents his participation in the acts of worship. Moreover, his slumber has tragic consequences. Unlike Peter, Paul, Silas, and the church in Jerusalem, Eutychus is not alert to the work of God. Instead, when he falls asleep, he also falls away from the worshipping community, into the darkness, and down three flights to the ground resulting in death.

Even though most of Jesus' disciples fall asleep at inopportune times in Luke's Gospel, in Acts most of Jesus' followers are depicted as being awake and alert at pivotal moments when God is at work during the night. Yet, the youthful Eutychus is a counterexample. Just as we are tempted

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to begin reading the story of the early Christians in Acts too triumphantly, we encounter a horrible mistake. Just as we begin wondering whether early Christians are now immune to spiritual slumber, we see Eutychus drift away and experience tragic consequences. Just as we begin to contemplate whether a person in an upper room can ever fail as badly as Judas again, we see the foolish Eutychus make a life-threatening mistake.

In sum, the downfall of Eutychus is certainly, to modern ears, a strange story, but it would have offered moral guidance to ancient readers. It would have offered a warning to the wise, a sobering reminder to all the readers of Acts. To the followers of Jesus it says, “Beware of diverging from the authentic worshipping community.” It exhorts readers to learn from Eutychus’s youthful and immature mistakes. It reminds the wise followers of Jesus that spiritual laxity must be avoided at all costs.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Martin Dibelius, *The Book of Acts: Form, Style, and Theology*, edited by K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004 [1956]), 43-44; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible Commentary 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 667, 669; and Richard I. Pervo, *Acts*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 510.

2 Andrew E. Arterbury, “The Downfall of Eutychus: How Ancient Understandings of Sleep Illuminate Acts 20:7-12,” in *Contemporary Studies in Acts*, edited by Thomas E. Phillips (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 201-221.

3 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, second edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 388.

4 Andrew E. Arterbury, “The Battle on the Mount of Olives: Reading Luke 22:39-46 in Its Literary Context,” in Todd D. Still, ed., *Texts and Contexts: Gospels and Pauline Studies and Sermons in Honor of David E. Garland* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, forthcoming).



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