



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Warning to the Wise:
Learning from Eutychus's
Mistake
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 57-64)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Warning to the Wise:

Learning from Eutychus's Mistake

The downfall of Eutychus is, to modern ears, a strange story. (We are more likely to criticize Paul's long-winded preaching than the youthful listener who dozes off.) How did the story offer moral guidance to ancient readers, exhorting them to learn from Eutychus's mistakes and avoid spiritual laxity at all costs?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 20:7-12

Reflection

Ancient readers probably interpreted poor Eutychus's dozing off in two ways: not only as literal, physiological sleep coming on a tired young man, but also as a metaphor for his irresponsible behavior. Andrew Arterbury explains, "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."

Arterbury identifies four themes in the overarching narratives of Luke and Acts that help us interpret this story about Eutychus as Luke's earliest readers would have.

- ▶ *Miraculous resuscitations of the dead* are rare in the Bible, but Luke describes three (of the five occasions): Jesus raising a widow's son (Luke 7:11-17), Peter raising Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42), and Paul raising Eutychus. The Lukan parallels suggest the apostles are faithfully "carrying on the work of Jesus after his death, and Jesus' spirit is at work in them."
- ▶ *The setting of an upper room* for worship "connotes a context of intimacy and sincere discipleship," Arterbury writes. In such a location, Jesus dines with his disciples on the night of his arrest (Luke 22:7-38); the disciples gather to await the arrival of God's Spirit (Acts 1:13-14); and Peter resuscitates Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42). And, thus, it is foreboding when a disciple leaves an upper room (cf. Judas in Luke 22:3-6, 47-48).
- ▶ *Their faithful worship of God* shows the Christians in Troas are in the line of authentic believers. Each mark of discipleship in Acts 2:42-43 (except prayer) explicitly appears in the story. The imagery of their lamps is significant: though it grows dark outside, they are prepared to continue in the light for an entire evening of worship and communion.
- ▶ *Sleep, night, and darkness* take on negative connotations here, as they often do in Luke's writings. Only Luke tells us that Peter, James, and John fell asleep during the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). None of the disciples stay awake with Jesus on the Mount of Olives (22:39-46), and Jesus associates the arresting mob there with "the power of darkness" (22:53).
But it is not always so. When angels herald Jesus' birth in the night, the vigilant shepherds hear them and respond (Luke 2:8-20); the prophet Anna worships continuously in the temple, day and night (2:37); and Jesus prays through the night before he selects the



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apostles (6:12). Arterbury explains, "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." Indeed, Jesus is a model, in both his behavior and teaching (cf. 21:34-36), for remaining alert for God's decisive work in the world.

Arterbury sees a pattern in Luke's Gospel: beginning with profound examples of vigilance (in the shepherds and Anna), and frequently describing Jesus in communion with God through the night hours, Luke then shows how the disciples repeatedly fail to be vigilant, but rather fall asleep precisely when God is active. However, this pattern is reversed in Acts after the Holy Spirit comes upon them: Peter is easily wakened by an angel, who guides him past the sleeping prison guards (Acts 12:1-17); church members have prayed through the night for Peter's deliverance (12:5, 12); Paul is guided by a nighttime vision of a Macedonian man (16:9-10); and when Paul and Silas are imprisoned, at midnight they are not sleeping, but "praying and singing hymns to God" (16:25), which leaves them ready to witness the miraculous earthquake that frees them and brings their jailer to faith in Christ.

"Just as we are tempted to begin reading the story of the early Christians in Acts too triumphantly, we encounter a horrible mistake," Arterbury concludes. "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." Eutychus's name means "the lucky one," and he is fortunate that through Paul, God graciously reverses the natural results of his spiritual laxity.

Study Questions

1. Review the marks of ideal discipleship in Acts 2:42-43. How are they present among the Christians in Troas?
2. Why do you think Luke decided to include this story about Eutychus at the end of Paul's missionary journeys?
3. What does the metaphor of remaining prepared for God's working in the world, even through the night, mean for you?
4. Have there been times when, due to spiritual laxity, you have missed God's working in your life, a friend or family member's life, or in your congregation? What are the times and sources of spiritual laxity in your discipleship?

Departing Hymn: "On the Wings of Light Declining"

On the wings of light declining
sinks the westering sun to sleep:
Lord, alike in dark or shining,
thy pure eyes their vigil keep.
Let thy light, which faileth never,
round me shine, though day depart;
and, though night prevaleth, ever
flood the chambers of my heart.

Páll Jónsson (1889), translated from Icelandic by *Charles Venn Pilcher* (1913)
Suggested Tunes: PLEADING SAVIOR or RUSTINGTON

Warning to the Wise: Learning from Eutychus's Mistake

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To interpret the story of Eutychus in light of significant narrative themes in Luke and Acts.
2. To consider the role of the story of Eutychus in the book of Acts.
3. To examine the temptation to spiritual laxity in the life of discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Book of Acts (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "On the Wings of Light Declining" locate one of the familiar tunes PLEADING SAVIOR or RUSTINGTON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

I have long been fascinated by the story of Eutychus, "the lucky one." The story seems so odd to me, but I identify with it in a strange way. During the 1960s, the flamboyant evangelist Angel Martinez (1922-1995) preached a two-week-long revival in my home church in Kentucky. He was a renowned and captivating speaker. (Soon after his death, a denominational newspaper named Martinez one of "the ten most influential Texas Baptists of the twentieth century.") Among the evangelist's stratagems to keep young people like me interested and involved in the revival messages was a nightly quiz, in which he asked a puzzling question about the Bible and promised to reward anyone who researched the answer before the next meeting. One night the question was: "Who was the young man who sat in a window, dozed off during the sermon, and fell three stories to his death?" Even the drowsiest among us perked up and began flipping through our Bibles when we heard that one!

I'll admit that for a long time I was in that camp of modern interpreters who see the story of Eutychus as merely a humorous interlude in Luke's account of Paul's return to Jerusalem. But Andrew Arterbury has convinced me the story had a serious point to ancient readers, and it is one that I need to hear today. In this study, Arterbury shows us that the trick to understanding the story of Eutychus is to appreciate some key elements of Luke's literary artistry.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide your hearing of the strange story of Eutychus, "the lucky one."

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 20:7-12 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study and the next one, “Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship,” members will need to appreciate Luke’s literary artistry not just to catch the detailed nuances of Luke’s story, but even to understand what the story is about and why it is included in the book of Acts. Determine how much time members will need to trace the four significant themes of miraculous resuscitations, upper rooms, faithful worship, and sleep/night/darkness through Luke and Acts. (Some members will only need a brief reminder of the relevant stories; others may want to summarize or to read some of them again.) Encourage members to reflect on the story’s *warning* about spiritual laxity.

Study Questions

1. Invite a member to read Acts 2:42-43 aloud to identify these marks of discipleship: the apostle’s teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, and miracles performed by the apostles. When we count Paul as the apostle present in Troas, all of these (except prayer) are explicitly mentioned in the brief story of Eutychus. By these marks Luke indicates that for the Christians in Troas, the all-night meeting with Paul is not an ancillary event, but part of the main work of their discipleship.
2. Andrew Arterbury suggests two reasons why Luke might include this story at the end of Paul’s missionary journeys. First, the resuscitation of Eutychus is Paul’s most noteworthy miracle event; it shows that he, like the Apostle Peter, is doing the work of God in faithful continuity with Jesus. Second, the story is a well-placed warning against spiritual laxity; it reminds us that all is not well among the early church members. The story provides a memorable final glimpse of the churches Paul started in Asia Minor and Greece: they included remarkably faithful members who shared deep communion, and others who failed due to their spiritual laxity. Yet the story ends on a positive note: the members embrace Eutychus and “are not a little comforted” by his miraculous return to them.
3. In Luke and Acts, the night and darkness often have negative metaphorical connotations. They are times of uncertainty and danger for human beings, and evil powers may be at work through people’s actions. This can make the darkness a time of fear, as well as rest and sleep, so either way it is easy to miss the night times when God is acting in the world.
The image of vigilance through the night does not mean that we should never sleep physically, but that we should remain on watch spiritually, even in situations that inspire in us fear or are filled with distraction. Over the centuries the Church has created special times of vigil—for example, before the times set aside to celebrate the announcement of Christ’s birth to Mary, the birth of John the Baptist, Christ’s birth and his death, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Individuals often set aside other times to be spiritually ‘tuned-in’—for instance, when a loved one is dying, a child is expected, a momentous decision is to be made, and so on.
4. Encourage members to reflect on important times that God has been at work around them, but they did not notice. Perhaps a friend or church member was being comforted in a spiritual crisis, or responding to a new sense of God’s purpose for their lives. Perhaps there was a physical or spiritual need in the community to which God was calling them to respond. In these times, were there fears and distractions of the world that occupied their attention instead? Were they tuning out because they were tired, or overwhelmed from the demands of God’s love, or disappointed in a lack of support from fellow believers?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.