

Acts - Commentaries by Stanley Bruce Anstey

Three Young Men Who Had a Fall: Reasons Why We Fail, Eutychus

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Let's turn first of all to Acts 20:7-12. "Upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached [discoursed] unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight. And there were many lights in the upper chamber, where they were gathered together. And there sat in a window a certain young man named Eutychus, being fallen into [overpowered by] a deep sleep: and as Paul was long preaching [discoursing], he sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead. And Paul went down, and fell on him, and embracing him said, Trouble not yourselves; for his life is in him. When he therefore was come up again, and had broken bread, and eaten, and talked a long while, even till break of day, so he departed. And they brought the young man alive, and were not a little comforted."

Eutychus was a young man who dropped out of the meeting! He didn't intend to, but that's what happened. His fall is a picture of those who leave the meeting literally. We see this happening among the Lord's people from time to time, and it's a grief. Is there anything that we can learn from this? I believe there is. Let's look at it more closely.

A Happy Scene

The assembly at Troas had a visit from the Apostle Paul. They broke bread together and listened to his ministry. What a happy scene that was! I suppose many of us would like to have been there. We might ask, "How could someone have a fall when they were in such favorable circumstances? You couldn't ask for more favorable conditions. But it just goes to show us that it is not good teaching that keeps us—even if it was from the Apostle Paul himself! The truth alone will not keep us; there must be an inner life of communion with the Lord too. The Bible says, "Let Thy lovingkindness and Thy truth continually preserve me" (Psa. 40:11). To be kept, not only do we need the truth in our souls, but we also need a practical enjoyment of the Lord's love.

It says, "There were many lights in the upper chamber." They had a lot of light, but one thing that seemed to be lacking was shepherding care. The fall of Eutychus emphasizes this, and perhaps it is the reason why the Apostle in the latter part of the chapter warned the Ephesian elders, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed [shepherd] the church of God" (Acts 20:28).

The assembly at Troas is not unlike many assemblies gathered to the Lord's name today. We have been privileged to have much recovered truth concerning Paul's doctrine, thanks to the labours of brethren in the early 1800's, but it seems that we don't do well in keeping our young people. It is something we certainly need to be exercised about. I remember the late Albert Hayhoe speaking of this and asking, "Why wasn't there someone who noticed Eutychus in that precarious position? Why didn't someone go over to him and put their arm around him and suggest that he come and sit next to them?" Well, hindsight is pretty good. We could be here all afternoon saying, "Woulda, coulda, shoulda ..."

Sitting in the Window

So, how did it happen then? What was the cause of Eutychus' fall? I believe that it had something to do with the place that he had chosen to sit—"in a window." A window, in Scripture, speaks of outlook. He perched himself in such a place where he could keep one eye on what was going on in the meeting and one eye on what was going on outside. You know, we can do that too—keep one eye on spiritual things and the other eye on the things of the world. But friends, it doesn't work. Sooner or later our outlook on the assembly will be affected by what we see outside. Our appreciation for the assembly and for the Lord in the midst will deteriorate. Yet there are people who think that they can have one foot in the meeting and one foot in the world and do all right, but sad to say, they end up having the same result as Eutychus—a fall.

Overpowered by Sleep

Having taken that place in the window, it wasn't long before Eutychus fell into "a deep sleep." This speaks of losing interest. His mind began to wander to other things, and soon he wasn't paying attention. Paul's voice drifted into the background. He was there, but he wasn't listening. It reminds me of a young man who once confessed, "I was present in body but absent in mind."

Now, if the Bible meetings are uninteresting to you, it may be that you're beginning to fall asleep spiritually. This is a serious sign of declension. Something has come into your life that is spoiling your appetite for divine things. Years ago, there was a father who came home from his day at work and sat down to supper with his wife and family. The mother had gone to a lot of work to make a good meal with meat and potatoes, and all those things that are important for good nutrition. As they were eating, he noticed that the kids were just playing with their food, rather than eating it. He encouraged them to "eat up," reminding them that the food was good to make them grow strong and healthy, but the kids weren't making any progress. They just weren't hungry. Finally, the man asked his wife if she knew why they weren't interested in eating, and she replied, "Well, actually, we had a little party this afternoon, and we had some cupcakes, and some cookies and ice cream." That explained it! What had happened? They were filled with a bunch of "junk food!"—things that didn't have much, or any, nutritional value—and the grand result was that they didn't have an appetite for the good food.

It can be just the same for us in the spiritual realm. One of the reasons why we have so little appetite for the Word of God is that we're eating too many "cupcakes!" We feed on all kinds of things from morning to night, and then when we take the Scriptures in hand, we have little appetite for it. Is it any wonder why the Bible meetings are uninteresting when we are in that state?

His Fall

Then there came the inevitable fall—Eutychus dropped out of the meeting. He “fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead.” Sitting on the windowsill as he did, there was a 50/50 chance that he could have fallen either way—into the meeting or out of it. But he didn’t fall in. It seems that people who spiritually fall asleep never fall into the meeting. No, you don’t just fall into the meeting. It takes exercise to be there. It takes spiritual conviction.

Then there was quite a stir among the saints. The word goes around the room, “Eutychus has left the meeting!” And what a departure it was! He fell down to the level of the world to which he had been looking. Is it any wonder that that is where he would end up? Brethren, it’s no different today. This is happening among us too. We hear of one here and one there slipping through the cracks and out into the world.

Symptoms of Leaving the Meeting

It’s sad, and we might ask, “Couldn’t they see it coming?” You know, there seems to be certain repeating signs—“symptoms”—in those that end up leaving the meeting. Let me give them to you:

- They start coming to fewer and fewer meetings until they are S.M.O’s (Sunday Morning Only).
- They dwell on the shortcomings of the saints, concluding that there is no love there.
- There is a marked lack of separation from the world—either in its secular or its religious aspects. At the same time, they accuse those who walk in separation of being legal.
- They claim that they are not getting fed in the meetings—meetings that they don’t come to!
- They are easily offended. Whatever is said to them, they seem to take it the wrong way.
- Their doctrine as to the one place of gathering becomes altered, to open the door for them to go elsewhere.

Recovering Eutychus

Well, what could be done for Eutychus? We read that Paul went down and embraced him, and lo and behold, he revived. Note this carefully: it was not Paul’s preaching that revived him; it was Paul’s embrace! Paul didn’t go over to the window and shout down a few verses of Scripture at him. No, he went down to where he was and embraced him tenderly. The point we are to get from this is that the backslider is not restored by preaching at him, but by showing that we have a genuine love and concern for his soul. What he needed was a hug—and that’s what Paul gave him. It teaches us that recovering those who have slipped away is a hands-on project. Those who have grown cold in their souls need to know that we still love them. This shows that Paul’s doctrine is important, but so is Paul’s embrace.

However, to reach those who have dropped out of the meeting requires discernment, because we don’t want to compromise principles. That’s never God’s way. We have to be careful. If the person is not going on in any specific sin, and there is no charge laid upon him by the assembly, then we should seek to reach him in some way. And love will find a way.

Note: it doesn’t say that Paul brought him up alive, it says, “And they brought him alive.” This indicates that the saints, as a whole, got involved in Eutychus’ recovery. This is nice to see. It reminds me of the return of Naomi. When the Lord brought her back, it says, “All the city was moved.”

It also reminds me of the return of the ten tribes of Israel (under the figure of “Ephraim”) in Jeremiah 31:1-3. In a coming day, the Lord will work in their lives in three ways. Firstly, He will use the “sword,” which speaks of His governmental discipline. Secondly, He will work in their lives by His “grace” by showing unmerited favour toward them; and thirdly, He will touch their hearts with His “love.” The grand result is that they will return to their land and to the Lord from the four corners of the earth. But the Lord will also work in the hearts of their brethren, the two tribes—the Jews (under the figure of “Rachel”) who will be restored to the Lord first. They will weep with “bitter weeping” for their brethren and will “refuse to be comforted” until they are restored (Jer. 31:15-16). Then Ephraim will come back bemoaning himself in true repentance. He will own that the chastisements of the Lord—“the sword”—were just and right (Jer. 31:18-19). This moves the heart of the Lord to say, “Therefore My bowels are troubled for him.” The Lord will then set up “waymarks” and “signposts” on a highway to Zion to help Ephraim get back to the land of Israel (Jer. 31:20-21). This shows that when there is real repentance, the Lord, so to speak, paves the way back for the backslider to return. Such is the heart of our God! He loves to restore the wanderer.

We learn from this that the Lord works from both ends—in the heart of the wanderer and in the hearts of his brethren. The Lord would have us to be actively involved in seeking the restoration of the wayward. Galatians 6:1 Says, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” James 5:19-20 says, “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert [restore] him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.” These verses show that there is something for us to do in regard to the restoration of a wanderer. We need to be in prayer and exercise about what we can do to help in his recovery.

Two Scenarios

I believe we are getting more and more confused as to how we should deal with those who are no longer with us. Some have slipped away, and others have been put away. There is a difference, and our actions toward them are to be different according to each case.

There are two scenarios that I have in mind particularly. Firstly, there are times when one is “put away” under a specific charge, having a particular sin “bound” upon them by an administrative act of the assembly (Matt. 18:18-20; 1 Cor. 5:13). With such a person we are told “not to keep company [not to mix]” with them as far as fellowship is concerned. Scripture says that we are not even to “eat” a common meal with them (1 Cor. 5:11). This course of action is to be taken toward them so that they would feel their wrong and be brought to repentance and restoration.

Sad to say, there are some well-meaning benevolent souls who will get up right after a person is put away and go over to them and give them a hug and confirm their love to them. This is surely contrary to Scripture. If we extend our love and fellowship to them in their sin before they are repentant, then we are only condoning their course. I am not picking on the sisters, but oftentimes they are the ones who are at fault in

this. They are emotionally driven creatures with large hearts who can, and sometimes do, get caught up in the emotion of the moment and go hug the person who has just been excommunicated.

Such actions give the person mixed signals—some of the brethren will not shake hands with them, and others do. What is the person supposed to think? I don't believe that we are not doing them any good by such actions. We may not realize it, but we are actually hindering their restoration. By trying to encourage them when they are still in their course of sin, we are prolonging their humbling which would lead to their repentance and restoration. J. N. Darby speaks (in his letters) of those who will deliberately have fellowship with those excommunicated as being a serious thing. It is really defying the action of the assembly and the authority of the Lord. Scripture indicates that we are not to express fellowship with such a person until there are signs of repentance. And even then, we are not to take matters into our own hands, but to notify the brethren so that the assembly can act together in the loosing of the censure placed on them.

The second scenario is when a person, through coldness and indifference, slips away from the meeting and the fellowship of the saints. There is no specific sin that he or she has been charged with—they have not been excommunicated—but they are no longer coming to the meetings. We need to reach out to these people and seek to recover them. Eutychus is an example of this second group. Often times, all they need is a little affection shown to them. It is usually a case where they are just discouraged. They need a hug, not a lecture.

We should not go after those in the first scenario, but we should go after those in the second scenario. But sad to say, sometimes we get this wrong too. We treat the person who has slipped away as though they have plunged into some serious evil and have been excommunicated. Consequently, we turn a cold shoulder and have no contact with them. The problem here, is that we have our principles mixed up. We have a square peg in a round hole, so to speak. We are applying the principles of action toward one who has been excommunicated to one who has slipped away through coldness or discouragement: this is a mistake.

The point I'm making here is that we can't paint everybody who leaves with the same brush. It's one thing to be put out under a specific charge of sin, and it's another thing to have slipped away through carelessness. We are to make a difference in such cases. Jude confirms this by saying: "Of some, have compassion, making a difference" (Jude 22). With one, we are to leave them with the Lord until there are signs of repentance; with the other, we are to go after them.

Now, of course, if someone leaves through coldness, and we learn later that they have gotten into some serious evil, we ought not to have contact with them in that case. As I said, there needs to be spiritual discernment in these things—as Paul said, "Ye which are spiritual, restore such an one ... " (Gal. 6:12). May God give us that kind of love and spiritual discernment to know how to deal with wayward ones.

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