

First Day of the Week:

Acts 20: 7

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Hey brother! I was wondering if I might ask you a question related to the account in Acts 20 regarding Paul and company staying 7 days and remaining in Troas.

As you know, part of the assertion made in which worship is demanded each and every Sunday is Acts 20:7. In part, the argument is made that Paul stayed in Troas for 7 days for the express purpose of not missing worship.

I've read much of your work on worship, and find it incredibly compelling, logical, and powerfully explanatory. I would ask what the context is behind Paul remaining in Troas if it wasn't for the express purpose of meeting the Sunday "worship requirement".

I thank you for your inquiry concerning Acts 20:7. I, too, misused this Scripture in the earlier part of my ministry. Years later, after I understood the subject of biblical worship more clearly, I did not accept my earlier teaching as exegetically sound. After reading your request, I decided, before looking at my numerous commentaries, that I would immediately read the full context of this section of Scripture without considering other opinions. One of the first things that caught my attention had to do with traveling by ships. The reason Paul was there for seven days is because his passage on the ship would not depart port until the eighth day (Monday). On another occasion, he had previously been stranded in Corinth for three months while waiting for the time when it would be safe to travel by ship (Acts 20:2). In 20:7 (month of April), the captain of the ship and the sailors were also conscious of the April winds, which accounted for the halt, possibly, of seven days before sailing. This time lapse could also have been associated with loading cargo. Luke did not give us the reason in specific terms. The following comments by Eckhart J. Schnabel¹ are instructive concerning sea travel:

¹ **Eckhard J. Schnabel** received his PhD from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, and is the Mary French Rockefeller Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological

The preposition “later” (ἄχρη, *achri*), used in connection with “five days,” means either that **Paul and his party sailed** “within” five days,¹⁷¹⁹ or, more plausibly in the context, that the sea voyage from Philippi/Neapolis [fī-līp’ī / nē-āp’ō-līs] to Troas [trō’ās] lasted five days, a plausible time since the ship would be sailing against the wind in the spring time.¹⁷²⁰ Given Paul’s hurry to reach Jerusalem (cf. v. 16), the fact that Paul and his associates spent seven days in Troas **appears to be due to the schedule of the ship** that Paul must board for his eastward journey to Syria, rather than to the “open door” that Paul had (presumably on an earlier occasion) in Troas (2 Cor 2:12–13).² (Emphasis mine)

Again, James Montgomery Boice³ seems to be on target when he writes: “Paul was delayed there seven days, probably because the winds were unfavorable or the ship was taking on cargo and couldn’t go.”⁴ In Acts 20:6, Luke writes, “But **we sailed** from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and **five days** later joined the others at Troas, **where we stayed seven days.**” The Scriptures do not state that they waited seven days to observe the communion as it is generally taught. Paul met with the believers in order to encourage them in their faith and teach them more about the Scriptures. They met on this occasion in order to listen to Paul’s discourse (διελέγετο, *dielegeto*, “to discuss or to address”) concerning Jesus as foretold by the prophets (20:22-36). Apparently, Paul and his associates,

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¹⁷¹⁹ Cf. BDAG, s.v. ἄχρη 1a α; cf. Barrett, *Acts*, 949.

¹⁷²⁰ Cf. Sterck-Degueldre, *Lydia*, 46. The journey in the other direction from Troas to Neapolis in 16:11 seems to have taken only two days, **a fact that can again be explained with the wind conditions.**

² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Expanded Digital Edition., Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Ac 20:5–6 (page 8:34).

³ **James Montgomery Boice** (July 7, 1938–June 15, 2000) was a Reformed theologian and pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from 1968 until his death. He received degrees from Harvard University, Princeton Theological Seminary, University of Basel in Switzerland and Theological Seminary of the Reformed Episcopal Church. Boice served as senior pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was president and cofounder of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, the parent organization of *The Bible Study Hour* radio broadcast on which Boice was a speaker for more than 30 years. He also served as chairman of the International Council of Biblical Inerrancy for over ten years. Boice’s 27-volume *Expositional Commentary* set reflects his years of experience in the pulpit. He also authored *Foundations of the Christian Faith* which provides a readable overview of Christian theology.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 340.

during this time, had made arrangements to board the ship eight days later after their arrival. Luke does not tell us the circumstances behind this “seven days” as to why the ship would not leave port until the eighth day. Nevertheless, they were well aware of the time of their departure.

Even though Paul met with the saints on the first day of the week in a three-story building, at night, (20:9), this gathering was not for the purpose of conducting a so-called “worship service.” As far as I recollect, every commentary that I read associated Acts 20:7 as a worship service. Within the Churches of Christ, as a whole, they maintain or propose a set of five ritualistic acts being performed in a certain way to constitute worship. This meeting of the saints, apparently, occurred late in the evening. As a result, they shared a common meal. It is possible that they took some of the bread and some of the wine to reflect upon the risen Lord. Yet, the text does not state this. R. C. H. Lenski,⁵ in my judgment, according to context, is correct in his analysis of 20:7. He pens the following words:

It is true that this is the first Christian service, held on a Sunday, that is recorded in Acts; yet little can be proved from it since it was a **special service** in every way, and Paul and his company left early on Monday morning. It was the last opportunity for him and for them to meet the congregation. **We feel that if this had been some other day of the week, such a final service would have been held**⁶ (Emphasis mine—bold and underlining)

Twice in Chapter 20, Luke calls attention to their “breaking bread” (common meal). In 20:7, the meal is mentioned. After raising Eutychus [yū’ tī-kūs] from the dead, Luke reports: “**Then** he [Paul] went upstairs **again** and broke bread and **ate** (20:11). Apparently the meal was interrupted by Eutychus falling to his death. Earlier, Luke wrote about the practice of the 3000 converted to Christ on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). Following their change, Luke records a reference to the disciples “breaking bread,” which terminology is used again in 20:7. Luke archives

⁵ **R. C. H. Lenski** (1864–1936) was a distinguished Lutheran scholar and commentator. He studied at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, and upon earning his Doctor of Divinity became dean of the seminary. He also served as a professor at Capital Seminary (now Trinity Lutheran Seminary) in Columbus, Ohio, where he taught exegesis, dogmatics, and homiletics. His numerous books and commentaries are written from a conservative Lutheran perspective. Lenski authored Lenski’s Commentary on the New Testament, a 12-volume series of commentaries that provides a literal translation of the New Testament. Among Lenski’s many works are *The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel*, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, and *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*.

⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 825.

the following behavior of those who accepted the message about Jesus: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the **breaking of bread** and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). This statement is generally related to the Eucharistic Meal, as it is commonly referred to. Yet, this terminology is also identified with a common meal. The following comments by Clinton E. Arnold⁷ are worthy of consideration:

3. Worship: The Breaking of Bread: **This expression refers both to sharing ordinary meals together** (furthering their fellowship) and **to remembering the significance of the death of the Messiah by celebrating what came to be known as “the Lord’s Supper.”** At this stage, the Lord’s Supper was held in conjunction with a common meal in homes throughout the city. This remembrance would have been a time of quiet reflection, as well as an occasion for expressing thanks to the risen Jesus and praising him for what he had accomplished.⁸ (Emphasis mine)

Even though this meeting (20:7) closed Paul’s final farewell toward the end of the first day of the week, this assembly does not, so it appears, to constitute a so-called worship service, but rather just an occasion for Paul to speak at length concerning the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. We have no way of knowing for sure if this meal involved a particular reference to the final Passover Meal in which Jesus instituted His distinctive Meal. Having said this, however, we cannot rule out this concept, even though Luke’s account appears to be just a common meal (20:7, 11).

We know from the context that it was night (20:8). Apparently, this meeting was somewhat different from their normal Sunday gatherings. This meeting appears to be a **special gathering**, which get-together included a community meal along with Paul addressing the believers. Luke chronicles an extended address by Paul until midnight. Following the conclusion of Paul’s exhortation, **Luke reports the information about Paul having previously made arrangements with the captain of the ship**. Seemingly, the ship captain informed him when the ship would leave the harbor. As a result, Paul stayed over until Monday, which appointment, it appears, Paul had made beforehand. The gathering concluded in the early hours of the morning. Luke then informs Theophilus (thē-ōf’ī-lūs):

We went on ahead to the **ship** and sailed for Assos [ās’ōs], where we were going to take Paul aboard. **He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot.**¹⁴ When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mitylene [mīt-ī-

⁷ **Clinton E. Arnold** is a professor of New Testament language and literature at Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, California.

⁸ Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, General Editor, Clinton E. Arnold, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002), 21).

lē'nē]. ¹⁵ **The next day we set sail** from there and arrived off Chios [equivalent to kī'ōs]. The day after that we crossed over to Samos [sā'mōs], and on the following day arrived at Miletus [mī-lē'tūs]. ¹⁶ Paul had **decided to sail past Ephesus** to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. (20:13-16)

The implication is that Paul would have left earlier because of his haste to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the Day of Pentecost. Since he could not leave until Monday, he selected this distinctive time to meet with a large crowd of the saints on Sunday evening. Acts 20:7 cannot mean that Paul had to wait seven days in Troas to participate in the Eucharistic Meal. He could have participated at other times during the week. The traditional interpretation by many Christians is a result of hand-me-down traditions about the Lord's Supper and the Sunday morning gatherings for a so-called worship service. Finally, we turn, once more to the Book of Acts in order to get a glimpse of their daily activities, which included "breaking bread" in their homes on a daily basis. The following citation is an excellent commentary on Acts 20:7:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ **Every day** they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They **broke bread in their homes and ate together** with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

In conclusion, I cite another source (Darrell Bock⁹) to call attention to the act of "breaking bread" as simply a community meal:

⁹ **Dr. Darrell L. Bock**, research professor of New Testament studies and professor of spiritual development and culture at Dallas Theological Seminary, serves as editor-at-large for *Christianity Today*, and is on the board of Chosen People Ministries and Wheaton College. From 2000 to 2001, Dr. Bock served as president of the Evangelical Theological Society. He has earned international recognition as a Humboldt Scholar for his work in Luke-Acts, historical Jesus study, biblical theology, as well as with messianic Jewish ministries. He has published articles in the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Dallas Morning News* and is a well-known author of over 30 books. His publications include *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods*, *Jesus According to Scripture*, an NIV Application Commentary on Luke, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, and commentaries on Acts and Luke in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (BECNT) series.

The meeting includes a community meal (Acts 2:42, 46; 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:24). Since he is leaving the next day, Paul spends much time addressing the Christians. With an extended sermonic exhortation, he speaks until midnight (see Acts 20:17-35 for a farewell speech in brief form).¹⁰

¹⁰ Darrell L. Bock, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, *Acts* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007), 619.