

# An Ephesian Goodbye

Acts 20:13-38

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Sometimes you have the strange experience of saying goodbye to someone, knowing you will likely never see them again on this side of heaven. It could be with a loved one who is sick. Each time you say goodbye, there is a distinct awareness that this might be the last time. Or it could be with someone who lives a distance from you. As you grow older, you realize that when there are years between visits, one or both of you may not make it to the next one. Or it could be when you send someone you care about off to war, knowing they may not make it home.

Many have also had the opposite experience—when you didn't know you were having your last conversation with someone until it was too late. The more of those experiences you have, the more aware you are of the importance of each encounter.

Our passage this morning records Paul's conversation with the elders of the church of Ephesus. He expected this would be the last time he would see them on this side of heaven. As such, the entire encounter was pregnant with emotion. But Paul wasn't just being sentimental. He wanted to give these Ephesians all they needed to continue growing and serving the Lord, even in his absence. So, Paul's words in our passage today are both practical and timeless.

## Travels

Paul had left Ephesus to visit some of the other local churches before returning to Jerusalem. He gathered an entourage of representatives from these churches who were carrying offerings to bring to the church in Jerusalem. Paul hoped this act of generosity would strengthen the relationship between the Gentile church and the Jewish church.

When we left off last week, the group had arrived at Troas, where Paul had spent the night preaching. After Eutychus fell to his death, Paul raised him from the dead and continued talking until morning. Today's text records the next stage of Paul's travels.

<sup>13</sup> Paul went by land to Assos, where he had arranged for us to join him, while we traveled by ship. <sup>14</sup> He joined us there, and we sailed together to Mitylene. <sup>15</sup> The next day we sailed past the island of Kios. The following day we crossed to the island of Samos, and a day later we arrived at Miletus.

<sup>16</sup> Paul had decided to sail on past Ephesus, for he didn't want to spend any more time in the province of Asia. He was hurrying to get to Jerusalem, if possible, in time for the Festival of Pentecost. <sup>17</sup> But when we landed at Miletus, he sent a message to the elders of the church at Ephesus, asking them to come and meet him. (Acts 20:13-17, NLT)

Paul decided to travel on foot to the town of Assos but sent the rest of the party by ship. They met up in Assos then traveled through the Aegean Sea, hopping from island to

island. Paul was on a schedule, hoping to arrive back in Jerusalem in time to attend the Festival of Pentecost, so he wasn't keen on making any unnecessary stops.

He opted not to make a stop in Ephesus, believing that he'd have a hard time leaving there again. But, when they arrived at the town of Miletus, which about 60 miles from Ephesus, Paul sent word to the Ephesian elders that he'd like to meet them there before he left. So, they traveled to Miletus, where Paul shared his final words with them.

## Paul's Example

Different people organize Paul's remarks to the Ephesian elders in different ways. As I read the passage, I see them in two broad categories. The first encouraged them to follow the example he had set for them. And the second gave them specific guidance to carry out moving forward. Paul started by reminding them of his example of service.

<sup>18</sup> When they arrived he declared, "You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now <sup>19</sup> I have done the Lord's work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews. <sup>20</sup> I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. <sup>21</sup> I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike—the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus.

<sup>22</sup> "And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don't know what awaits me, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. <sup>24</sup> But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.

<sup>25</sup> "And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again. <sup>26</sup> I declare today that I have been faithful. If anyone suffers eternal death, it's not my fault, <sup>27</sup> for I didn't shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know. (Acts 20:18-27, NLT)

Any time Paul points to the example of his ministry, there is always a part of me that bristles, because part of me feels like he's being prideful about what he's done. I suspect that's primarily because that is a struggle I face, and I always want to check my own motives for telling others about the things I have done. But I don't think Paul was being prideful in this whatsoever. Rather, I think he was reminding them of what they had seen. They had seen his example, and now he wanted them to carry on the work in the same way he had.

So what did Paul do? **First, he worked humbly and with tears.** Anyone can claim to be humble, but these people knew Paul. They had seen his humility consistently and up close during his three years with them. Paul had not concerned himself with how people viewed or treated him. He was concerned only with making sure people understood who Jesus was. He told these elders to continue in that pattern after he left.

Pride is a real danger in all ministry. If we begin to see some “success”, we can begin to feel that we are somehow special or superior to others. Or we can become overconfident in our abilities and lose sight of our need to rely on God. Or we can believe we are special and no longer need to work humbly with those around us. We have seen this happen time and time again in some of the large ministries of our day. The leaders begin to believe they are special, and this leads to all sorts of problems.

I’ve been in churches where the pastors insisted that everyone refer to them as “Pastor so-and-so”. If you called them by just their first name, you would quickly be corrected and reminded they were a pastor. I know the idea is that we should show respect to our leaders, but I’m not sure I should be concerned what people call me. I think I should be concerned with carrying out my calling well.

We should all serve the Lord without concern for whether people applaud us or even notice what we do. Our service should be to Him, not to those who might give us recognition. That was Paul’s emphasis to the Ephesians.

Paul also says he served with tears. I don’t think Paul was a weepy guy, but I do think he cared deeply for these people. He surely spent many days and nights sitting with people sharing in their joys and hurts. He rejoiced with those who rejoiced and wept with those who wept. This is what Christian love looks like. It means joining others in their lives, in the good and the bad, the exciting and the mundane. Paul was reminding them that the Christian life is about serving others, not about yourself.

**Second, he proclaimed the gospel boldly.** This is probably the thing for which Paul was best known. He was very consistent in his message. It didn’t matter whether he was speaking to Jews or Gentiles, men or women, educated or not, royal or common, he consistently preached a very clear message: you are a sinner in need of a savior. Jesus Christ is the Savior of all people, so you must turn to Him in faith.

In these verses he mentions two elements that are the crux of the gospel. The first is repentance from sin, and the second is faith in Jesus. Both are essential to the gospel message. Sometimes we don’t talk about sin and turning from our old lives. We just tell people, believe in Jesus and all will be well! And of course, that’s true. If you truly believe in Christ, then you will be saved. But you cannot truly trust Jesus as your Savior unless you also submit to Him as your Lord. Both are imperative. Genuine faith is inextricably linked to genuine repentance—you cannot have one without the other. This is why Paul insisted that we must repent and believe to be saved.

People do not like to be confronted with their sin. They do not like to be called to repentance. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t necessary. Paul pointed out that he never shrunk back from this duty. The Ephesians had seen this firsthand. They had seen riots and had seen Paul attacked. They knew that while Paul always spoke with love, he also never compromised on God’s Word.

Paul says he did these things both publicly and in private, in people's homes. This reminds us of a couple of things. First, he was consistent. Paul was the same guy with the same message whether he was in front of crowd or sitting in someone's living room. Second, he wasn't too big to spend time with individuals. Paul could have easily said that he was too important to visit families at home, or that he needed to focus on the bigger crowds, because his time wasn't best spent doing ministry one-at-a-time. But he did both. He wanted to reach people by whatever means necessary.

Paul even declared that he had been faithful in declaring the gospel so consistently that he did not bear any responsibility for those who did not believe. He felt confident that no one who knew him could claim he hadn't shared the message with them. They all had the information, what they did with it was up to them.

What a goal for us! I hope that those who know me would say that I clearly explained the gospel message to them. But I suspect that's not as true as it should be. So this is something for us each to strive for.

Paul also foreshadowed what was to come. He said he felt bound by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem, and the Lord had told him that hardship and imprisonment lay ahead. We'll talk more about Paul's attitude toward these sufferings next week, but for now, it's worth noting that Paul was resolute. He was not deterred by hardships, because he believed the Lord would work even through the hard times to accomplish His purposes. Paul simply wanted to be faithful, regardless of circumstances. He desired the same attitude from the Ephesians, and I think of us as well.

## Instructions

After pointing to his own example of service amongst the Ephesians, he spoke directly to these leaders and gave them some instructions to follow.

<sup>28</sup> "So guard yourselves and God's people. Feed and shepherd God's flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders. <sup>29</sup> I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup> Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. <sup>31</sup> Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you.

<sup>32</sup> "And now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself. <sup>33</sup> "I have never coveted anyone's silver or gold or fine clothes. <sup>34</sup> You know that these hands of mine have worked to supply my own needs and even the needs of those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> And I have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' " (Acts 20:28-35, NLT)

Paul gave them a couple of important instructions. **First, guard yourselves and God's people.** Paul warned that there would be many opportunities to be led astray. Satan will do everything he can to attack the church and lead it away from God. So Paul said these leaders should be on guard.

Notice where he started though. He told them to guard themselves. Jesus pointed out that we are often far better at identifying sin in others than we are in ourselves. Paul reiterated this as well. Those in positions of leadership (and those who are not) must carefully guard their own hearts. We must be ruthless in attacking areas of sin and compromise when they show up in our lives. We have seen time and time again how easy it is for leaders to get tripped up. When they do, the effect ripples outward, affecting many. So, we must start by guarding our own hearts and being honest about the things that aren't right, then doing something about them.

But he also said to guard the people of God. Paul used the analogy of a shepherd. This is where we get the term "pastor", which means shepherd. A good shepherd keeps his flock healthy by feeding them well. In the church, this means teaching people God's word. It is tempting to get sidetracked by many other things, current events, popular culture, politics, or any number of other things. These may draw crowds, but if we want our churches to be healthy, they must feed primarily on the Word of God.

But shepherding involves more than just feeding. It also involves defending the flock. I always loved the scene in the movie *The Patriot*, when the Pastor leaves with the men to fight in the war. One man stopped him, surprised to see him carrying a rifle. The pastor responded, "A shepherd must tend his flock....and at times, fight off the wolves." Maybe I just like it because it sounds like a "tough guy" thing for a pastor to say, but there is great truth in that statement. The wolves we must fight off are not likely to be redcoats or any other such enemies though. Paul warns that the church must fight against false teachers. Those teachers will come from outside, but may also arise from within. He says people will distort truth to gain a following. When people think they can amass power or influence by a certain teaching, it becomes a very seductive temptation. As the church, we must stand firm in the truth, opposing false teaching by calling it out when we see it and combating it with the truth of scripture instead. This is how we fight off the wolves and protect God's church.

Paul's second instruction is **to be generous with one another.** Paul said he never coveted anyone's gold or silver, but worked hard to not be a burden to anyone. He quotes Jesus (though this particular quote is not recorded in the gospels), that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." We must give generously to one another: of our time, our money, our talents, our energy, our care, etc. without worrying about whether others are giving us as much as we've given them. When we start trying to keep score, we will miss out on the blessings God has for us. We should serve each other selflessly, knowing that when we do, we are really serving the Lord—and serving the Lord will always result in blessing. Nothing done for Him is ever wasted.

## Conclusion

After Paul said all these things, the Ephesians said their goodbyes.

<sup>36</sup> When he had finished speaking, he knelt and prayed with them. <sup>37</sup> They all cried as they embraced and kissed him good-bye. <sup>38</sup> They were sad most of all because he had said that they would never see him again. Then they escorted him down to the ship. (Acts 20:36-38, NLT)

The people loved Paul, but knew he was going where God had called him. I doubt any of the Ephesians tried to stop him or get him to stay, but the goodbye still hurt.

Our church can resonate with the Ephesians better than most. Just a year ago, we said goodbye to my dad as the senior pastor after 43 years together. No one wanted to stop him from going on to the next stage of his life, but we all still felt genuine loss. Paul told the Ephesians they would never see him again. Even though they trusted God, it's always hard to say goodbye to a friend.

As we conclude, we should always ask, what do we learn from this passage? How should it affect the way we live? I've got some suggestions.

**First, we should be bold in sharing the gospel.** Like Paul, we should strive to be able to say that no one can blame us for their lack of faith. We ought to be sure the people around us understand the gospel message, and understand their need for repentance and for a Savior who can forgive them and make them whole. We must not shy away from these conversations but embrace them with gusto!

**Second, there are wolves.** Satan is crafty, and he will do whatever he can to lead us astray. We must be discerning in who we listen to and allow to influence us. Is the greatest influence in your life God's Word or the words of others? Do you listen to others critically, or do you tend to absorb everything certain people say? We must check everything carefully against God's word, because there are wolves everywhere—even among those who claim to be part of the church.

**Finally, we must guard ourselves.** We have great capacity for sin and evil within us. If we are not constantly doing battle against our own flesh, we will quickly drift into things we shouldn't. We must be diligent in checking our actions, motives, and thoughts, to ensure we are going in the right direction. If we want to go in the right direction as a church, we need to make sure we are as individuals. No one else can do this for us, we must take responsibility for ourselves and work at righteous living.

God has entrusted us with a great treasure—His church, His body of believers here on earth. We should care for it, seek to protect it, and strengthen it. And we should contribute to it as best we can. Like the Ephesians, the Lord has given us a job to do, and now it's up to us to do it well.

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