

MBC – 8/16/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson
“Paul’s Farewell to the Church at Ephesus”
 Acts 20:17-24

Last Lord’s Day we saw that Paul was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost, and he’s cutting it close. He avoids stopping in Ephesus because he knows he won’t be able to tear himself away. Instead he sails to Miletus, and sends for the Ephesian elders to meet with him there. He wanted a few precious moments with the leaders of this church that was so dear to him. And the Spirit-inspired words he gave them are some of the most important words in the NT for church leaders. Let’s read it together—

- Acts 20:17–38 ¹⁷Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸And when they came to him, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²²And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.
- ²⁵And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.
- ³²And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ” ³⁶And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

* * *

“Who was Paul speaking to and why was it so important?”

Look at—

- ¹⁷Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the *elders* of the church.

These were the leaders of the church. The word for elders is *presbuteroi* – sounds like Presbyterians, it means “older men.” And these same men are called by another term in—

- Acts 20:28 ²⁸Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*.

The Gk. word for overseers is *episkopoi* – sounds like episcopal, and it means to “look over,” to *over-see* the flock, and the task of these *elders* and *overseers* is—

- (v.28) to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Isn't that amazing? “Care for” is to *shepherd* the church of God: this is the verb form of the word shepherd or pastor. So the men whom God has appointed to lead local churches until Jesus returns, are a team of men called by 3 different names because of their function—

- 1.) Elders – referring to their spiritual wisdom and life experience.
- 2.) Overseers – because they oversee and care for the church, and
- 3.) Shepherds or Pastors – because they lead, feed, guide and protect the flock of God.

Paul wanted to meet with these men because they would determine the future of the church in Ephesus. As the leaders go, so goes the flock. Paul loves this church. He is burdened for their care, and their protection. And his words here were prophetic: some of you were here for our study of 1 Timothy a few years ago and you remember how just a few short years later, the Ephesian church was viciously attacked by false teachers from without and within.

I told you it's probably the most important passage on church leadership in the NT. We all need to hear it because it describes how the shepherds are to lead – and how the sheep are to follow. The first thing Paul brings up is his own life and ministry with them in Ephesus. He taught with his words and he taught with his life.

I. Past – Paul's ministry in Ephesus (vv.17-21).

A. The example of Paul's life.

- ¹⁸And when they came to him, he said to them: “*You yourselves know* how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹servicing the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews;

Does Paul seem defensive here? Well, he does: “*You yourselves know – you can bear witness.*”

Well he was defensive, because he had enemies, inside and outside the church, who attacked his apostolic credentials. They slandered his integrity, his motives. They accused him of being in it for the money – that he was on a power trip. In our reading from 1Thess.2 earlier Paul defended himself against the charges of being deceptive, a flatterer, seeking his own glory. Some in Galatia even accused Paul of being a man-pleaser! Paul?—

- Galatians 1:10–12 ¹⁰For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

The Judaizers said, “The reason Paul tells the Gentiles they don't have to be circumcised or keep the Law is just to make easy converts – of course sinners want to hear *that* message!” Legalists still talk like that, don't they?

But understand that Satan orchestrated every attack against Paul for one reason: to undermine his authority as an Apostle of Jesus Christ, because if his authority was undermined, then his Gospel message could be ignored. And let me tell you, you could attack Paul for just about anything else – and people apparently did make fun of his voice, and the way he looked. He would put up with that. But mess with his authority as a messenger of the Gospel, and he would fight you! He said this in Galatians 1—

- ¹¹For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. ¹²For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. And he began the epistle like this—
- Galatians 1:1 ¹Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—
- 1 Corinthians 1:1 ¹Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.
- 1 Corinthians 9:1–2 . . . Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ²If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

And he began his epistle to the Ephesians the same way—

- Ephesians 1:1 ¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

So yes he was defensive of the ministry that Jesus Christ had entrusted to him! But he never defended himself for the sake of his ego, it was only in order to defend the Gospel he preached. So back to our passage: Paul knows that once he leaves, the false teachers will come, from without, and from within, and the first thing they will do is try to discredit his message by discrediting him. So he wants these words to ring in the minds of these dear men—

“Don’t let anyone deceive you – men believe your own eyes and ears! I lived with you, I was part of the church family, wasn’t I? And what did you see, day in, and day out? You saw me—

1.) Serving the Lord

Serving is from *doulos* = slave. That’s the way Paul saw his ministry: he was bought and owned by Jesus Christ, and his entire purpose on earth was to serve Him and His Gospel. He was a man in bondage to Jesus Christ. His sole purpose in life was to do His will. Doesn’t that make life simple? And look just a few verses later:

- Acts 20:22 ²²And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, *constrained* by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there,

‘*Constrained*’ means bound, imprisoned, in chains – by the Holy Spirit – to go to Jerusalem! He had no choice in the matter. Bound and constrained. Paul wouldn’t have understood the term “short-term missions!” He was a lifer. And those Ephesian elders were nodding their heads – that’s exactly the way Paul had lived among them.

2.) With all humility and with tears

It's always sounds a little weird when someone points out their own humility – like—

- Numbers 12:3 ³Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. (Who wrote Numbers? Moses!)

But the truth is, Paul *was* humble: remember a couple weeks ago when we saw how Christians in Corinth were all ga-ga over Apollos, the silver-tongued orator, and Paul was slipping in the popularity polls? Paul just rejoiced that the Gospel was being preached so well!—

- 1 Corinthians 3:5–7 ⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants (slaves) through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

I remember years ago seeing a poster on the wall of a Christian business-man. It was a quote from Harry Truman: “It Is Amazing What You Can Accomplish If You Do Not Care Who Gets the Credit.”

Paul had that written on the inside of his ESV Study Bible!

Paul could say “You’ve seen me serve the Lord with humility,” because it was true, and because he wanted these men to follow his example – so even if it might sound a bit arrogant, Paul would risk that, he didn’t care, if it would get these men to follow his godly example.

- *The leaders of Christ’s church must be – must be – *humble* men, who seek the glory of Christ, and not their own. And it’s one or the other isn’t it? I don’t have to tell you that many pastors today (especially in the mega-churches) think they are celebrities and rock-stars – you see them on stage like it’s a rock concert: skinny jeans, tight t-shirts with tight abs, rockin’ designer clothes (One of these ‘pastors’ wears Nike “Fear of God” sneakers when he preaches – they cost \$1K – I’m serious. . . But in Isa.48:11 God says, “*My glory I will not give to another.*” Someone said: “No man can give the impression that he himself is clever and that Christ is mighty to save.”

George Whitefield was the greatest English-speaking preacher who ever lived. He preached in the US and England in the 18th century, and he attracted crowds of 10’s of 1000’s to hear him preach outdoors – someone calculated that his largest crowd was 80,000 people – in a field, with no sound system.

But Whitefield was a godly man and he fought hard against stealing the glory that belongs to Christ. Once someone came up after he preached and said, “Rev. Whitefield, your words were so beautiful, so eloquent.” He said, “I know. The devil told me that just as I was stepping down from the pulpit!”

Paul was humble because knew who he was. If he had any gifts, they were all given to him by God – he had nothing to boast about. And the older he got, the more humble he became. We’ve seen this in his writings—

- A.D. 54 – Paul writes 1Co 15:9: *I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.* Paul sees himself as the lowest of 13 apostles.
- A.D. 61 – Paul writes Eph 3:8: *I am the very least of all the saints,* Paul sees himself as the lowest of all Christians, about 100,000 at that point.

- A.D. 65 – Paul writes 1 Tim 1:15: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* At the end of his life, he has never been more godly, more close to Christ, and now he sees himself as the lowest human being alive at that time, approx. 350,000,000.

So he says, “Whatever anyone else says about me, you yourselves know how I lived among you. With all humility—

3.) And with tears.

They had seen his tears. A few verse later he says—

- Acts 20:31 . . . remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

You probably don’t think of Paul as being a weepy guy. But they saw it: he was so burdened for the church that he agonized over them in his prayers, and in his teaching and warning them. When he was dealing with all the grief the Corinthian church was giving him, he said—

- 2 Corinthians 2:4 ⁴For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

He wrote to the Philippians—

- Philippians 3:18 ¹⁸For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Paul was like the Lord Jesus: “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Because eternal things were so real to Paul, weren’t they? If they were that real to us, maybe we would weep more too. (Steve Fernandez, Angelo and Mike Lucas)

*I’ve had this conversation with other pastors: we want to be thick-skinned *pachyderms!* – not bothered by criticism or insensitive things people say, or lack of encouragement – but you can’t minister to people with rhino-hide. You have to be thin-skinned to feel what people feel, to be empathetic with those who hurt, to weep with those who weep. And thin skin gets hurt. That’s just the way it is. It’s an occupational hazard.

They saw Paul serve Christ tirelessly, they saw his tears, and compassion, and they saw him endure all the —

- . . . trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews;

They had watched how Paul endured suffering and persecution. He was always aware of the example he was setting, even in his suffering. What they saw was a man who kept at it, and never slacked off—

B. The example of Paul’s teaching and testifying. 20-21

- Acts 20:20 ²⁰how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house,

Even with the distraction of threats on his life, he kept teaching them. Nothing could stop him. Remember, after they kicked him out of the synagogue, he rented out the school of Tyrannus lecture hall and used that. “House to house” means that Paul went to the different house church groups in the city – I’m sure he got a whole lot of dinner invitations from people who wanted him to answer their Bible questions.

But what did Paul mean “*I did not shrink back from declaring to you anything that was profitable?*” What is profitable? “*All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable – for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*” Paul didn’t hold back *any* truth from God’s Word that they needed to hear. He didn’t let the fear of man keep him from preaching on hard things, things that might offend.

- Beloved, that’s a faithful servant of God: he feared God more than he feared man, so he preached what God would have him preach, not what man would *want* him to preach. Oh, that’s rare today. A dear brother emailed me just this week and said that his church (a large church) won’t take a stand on anything – why? Because they don’t want to offend anyone – so they *shrink back from declaring what is profitable*. And the sheep slowly starve.

I’m telling you, this is the *norm* today. Happy clappy churches that offer fluffy puffy positive messages – they don’t even call them sermons. Worship is always a “celebration.” On their websites they promise upbeat contemporary music – you won’t have to sing anything, say anything or sign anything; just come as you are – and leave as you came. Grab a latte’ in the lobby before you go. (I wish we had latte’s in our lobby!)

Just check out some church websites and see if I’m exaggerating. On many of them it’s hard to even find what they believe. But there are plenty of stock pictures of smiling, happy people –and perfect families. What a con job. That’s not life, and that’s not the church. We are sinners who need to hear about a Savior. We are a hurting people who need to hear that Jesus heals the broken-hearted. And need shepherds who weep because they love Jesus and love His sheep. And they will preach hard truths and deep doctrines to get us through the suffering Jesus promised us in this life. And the Gospel that gives us the only real hope.

Paul goes on—

- Acts 20:21 ²¹testifying both to Jews and to Greeks—

Stop. Even that got him into trouble, didn’t it? That Paul would offer the same truth and the same Gospel to Jews *and* Gentiles? That infuriated the Jews. I remember hearing John MacArthur tell about preaching in the South in the 60’s. He and a group of young men preached at a white church, then they went and preached at a black church, and they were arrested and thrown in jail! But the Gospel is for everyone. And what Paul testified to everyone was: “*repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

Repentance and faith—

Repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ: you must turn from your sins, and you must trust in Jesus. This is the response to the Gospel that saves. Unbelievers need to hear this: Jesus died for sinners and rose again. You must repent of your sins and trust in Him as your Lord and Savior to be saved and receive eternal life. This is what Paul preached to the lost, Jew and Gentile.

And it’s also what he preached to believers! Don’t we need to hear this, over and over? We need to hear the good news of all that God has done for sinners through Christ – we need to hear over and over: that

our Jesus lived a sinless, obedient life, and died as our Substitute to take away our punishment. Then He rose from the grave as the death conqueror! And then we need to hear that we must *keep* repenting of our sins, and *keep* trusting in Jesus. We need to hear this over and over, don't we? Like every Sunday?

- Which means that we need to be confronted with our sins: our coveting and greed; our materialism and worldliness; our lust; our gossip and ungodly words; our unwillingness to forgive – after we have been forgiven by Christ! Our laziness and lack of loving and serving each other. Our lack of submission to authority. Hard stuff! But don't we need to hear it?
- And then don't we need to hear that we must turn from those sins and trust again in Jesus who will receive us as His children, and wash us and renew us and transform us? Over and over? That's the way Paul preached and taught. He held nothing back.

I believe Jesus' sheep, are drawn to this kind of preaching because they recognize Jesus' voice in it! They hear their shepherd! And they want to follow Him.

- But if your pastor refuses to confront sin he might need to go to the doctor for a spinal x-ray – to see if he has one!

So Paul reminded these men of his life example and his teaching while he was with them. He could say with a clear conscience that he lived what he taught. And he taught all possible truth with all possible people in all possible ways. He gave the whole gospel to the whole city with his whole strength. What an inspiration he was to them. Then he tells them of his plans—

II. Present – Paul's plans to go to Jerusalem (vv.22-27).

- Acts 20:22 ²²And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there.

Paul was a man on a mission: he had to get the collection to the saints in Jerusalem. This was one of the most important things he ever accomplished. It would bring together Jew and Gentile believers. We know how it binds us together with our brothers and sisters in Uganda when we are able to help them in times of crisis. And by now, Paul's reputation and integrity are at stake – so he is consumed with getting there. Paul is "bound" by the Holy Spirit – He must have been thinking of Jesus and the way He felt on His final journey to Jerusalem to be crucified. And for all Paul knew, he might die there as well—

He just talked about the "plots of the Jews" against him in Ephesus. There is no place on the planet with more Jews than Jerusalem! And they want this defector dead. Shortly before this he wrote to the Christians in Rome and asked for prayer—

- Romans 15:31 (Pray) that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.

He didn't know exactly what would happen, but the Spirit had warned him—

- Acts 20:22 . . . not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

One thing Paul knows is that everywhere he goes, they have a jail cell waiting for him! But he knew this from the time Jesus saved him—

- Acts 9:15–16 [Jesus is speaking to Ananias about Saul] ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry *my name* before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of *my name*.”

Paul knew. Somehow the Holy Spirit was always whispering it in his ear: “Paul, you have the greatest calling on this earth, to preach the unfathomable riches of God’s grace in Jesus to all the peoples! But Paul, it will come with a cost!”

Now some people think this is a contradiction – how could the HS warn him of danger and then tell him to walk into it? Or, they think that Paul was disobedient to the Holy Spirit: if the Spirit warned about danger ahead, he should have avoided the danger. One of my go-to commentaries says that Paul was wrong and disobedient to keep going toward Jerusalem.

- We’re going to see in the next chapter that the Spirit specifically warns Paul of danger in Jerusalem and some of his friends – Luke included – told him he shouldn’t go. Paul said, “Danger? That’s my middle name! I’ll see you there.”

Beloved, the call of God for *Jesus* was to suffer at the hands of godless men, wasn’t it? It was the call of God for Paul, and it is the call of God for every follower of Jesus Christ until He returns—

- Philippians 1:29 ²⁹For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for *His sake*.

To suffer in your struggle against sin, to suffer for bearing His name, and sometimes to suffer for bowing the knee to Him, and not Caesar. Just like Jesus, just like Paul: *We will bear the cross before we wear the crown.*

But look at how this humble, determined man faced the promise of suffering—

- Acts 20:24 ²⁴But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course (or *race*) and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

His own life was not as important as finishing the work Jesus Himself had given Paul to do, which was to testify (Gk. *martureo* – to be a witness – it’s where our word martyr comes from.)

To testify, even to death, of *“the good news of the grace of God.”* What was Paul saying to these elders about his own life, but also about theirs?

Faithfulness is better than life. (repeat) Better to lose your life than waste your life.

And Paul meant this. In the next chapter when his friends are begging him not to go on to Jerusalem—

- Acts 21:13 ¹³Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

“I just want to finish the race and the ministry Jesus gave me to do.”

- The word for “*finished*” is from the same word Jesus gasped from the cross, “*It is finished!*” I have to wonder if Paul was thinking, “I want to come to the end my life the way my Lord came to the end of His – knowing I finished my work, did the will of my Father in heaven, to the very end – and didn’t get sidelined along the way, or waylaid by sin. Didn’t opt out for some final years of “the good life,” throwin’ out a line on the Sea of Galilee.”

What gave Paul this clear, focused mindset? *What awaited him in the next life was worth far more than any sacrifice in this life.*

Beloved, I mentioned it last Lord’s Day: Paul had seen the risen Lord Jesus; seen Him in blinding glory, communed with Him. Death would mean being face-to-face with Jesus for the rest of eternity, so for Paul, to die was gain! And I remind that you Paul had even been to heaven and back – (2Cor.12), and he wanted to return!

*I want all of you grab on to this and take it home with you: Right here we have the testimony of a man who had been on the other side, seen Jesus who will meet us on the other side and said: “Whatever suffering or sacrifices you endure to remain faithful to Jesus will be more than worth what you will experience in the next life. So: Faithfulness is better than life. And it’s much better to lose your life than waste your life.

We’re going to pick it up in v.25 next Lord’s Day, but Paul made it to Jerusalem, was arrested, sent to Rome and spent 2 years under house arrest there. He was released, and later arrested again under the Emperor Nero. This time he wasn’t in a house chained to a guard and granted visitors. This time he was in the infamous Mamertine prison – where Peter was eventually imprisoned before his execution. He was lowered down by ropes into a hole in the ground. And he was there until they pulled him out to cut off his head.

But he managed to get a final, brief letter off to Timothy. He knew it would be his last. And I want you to listen, and ask yourself if you want to be able to say the same thing when your time comes to leave this earth—

- 2 Timothy 4:6–8 . . . the time of my departure has come. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Will you be able to say that with a clear conscience, as you prepare to leave this world?

And will Jesus be able to say to you when you meet Him, “Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your Master”?