



Acts 20:28-38
The Challenges of Living for Christ

Summary: What do you need to survive trials? Three things: Learning, Leadership, and the Lord.

Have you ever had to say good-bye to someone you love? I mean, the final good-bye. Or at least what you think might or could be the final good-bye. Not just see you later, but this is it, I may never see you again.

What did you say, what do you wish you could have said? What if you knew that after you said goodbye, they would go through difficult times? What would you say then? Or, go a little further back in time, what would do for them if you knew hard times were coming but they weren't here yet; how would you prepare in advance for what lies ahead so that you could send them off with a clean conscience?

This morning, as we turn to Scripture, we find the Apostle Paul on his way to Jerusalem. Life has been challenging recently and now he has the sense God is telling him: things are going to get worse. So, he's making some final preparations, saying some final goodbyes.

On one particular layover, he calls for the pastors of the church in Ephesus, a city in modern Turkey, to come down and meet with him. He once spent several years living in Ephesus, so these are people he knows. They're friends. He tells them what's going on and warns them: they should expect difficulty themselves soon, but they have what they need to endure it. And then, he gives his final goodbye.

Last week we focused on the first part of their meeting where Paul reminded them of how he personally lived through difficult times - setting an example for them and drawing strength and courage from the gospel message.

This week we'll focus on how he encourages them to live in response and we'll note three things people need in order to live through difficult times: learning, leadership and the Lord. Let's read - we pick up as Paul reminds them of everything he's done for them, how he prepared them for these hard times that are coming.

Acts 20:25 "And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I *am* innocent of the blood of all *men*. 27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.

Paul reminds them of everything he did to prepare them for the difficult things they will face - he taught them the whole counsel of God and kept nothing back. And, he lived as an

example for them to see and imitate. He's done everything he can for them, no regrets. But now it's up to them.

Parents, this is the moment you're looking for when your kids graduate, or when they move out, when they get married. You want to be able to say, I've done everything I can for you – taught you everything you need to know. Now it's up to you.

Coaches, this is the motivational speech you give before the big game – I've done everything I can for you, taught you, encouraged you, conditioned you, but I can't play the game for you, you've got to go out there and win.

Teachers, this is the same thing you say before the big exam – you've prepared them to the best of your ability, but you can't take the test for them, now it's their turn.

Friends, this moment comes in each of our lives. It actually happens many times, with varying degrees of seriousness and consequence as we take the important test, play the big game, or make the major move in life. Sooner or later, the baton is passed to each of us and we must face the challenges life brings our way. What do we need to make it through those trials?

I want to suggest at least three things based on what we see here in Acts 20: learning that has occurred in the past which we can apply in the present; leadership to guide us through; and the Lord watching over us all.

Listen to what Paul tells these pastors – in light of my example, in light of what I've taught you, shown you, and in light of the fact that this is probably my last goodbye to you,

Acts 20:28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. **29** For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. **30** Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. **31** Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

Paul warned these leaders in the church that they would face spiritual threats from physical people – savage wolves from the outside and subversive shepherds within. Their job was to protect the congregation from these dangers by providing leadership. Because during trying times, people need loving leaders.

And that applies at all levels. Mom and dad, it's your job to provide loving leadership to protect the sheep of your home from external and internal threats. And it's the job of government to provide loving leadership protecting people from external invasion as well as domestic threats.

But pastors, parents, and politicians won't be able to do it all on their own. No, when difficult times come you will also need the Lord. Listen. Paul says, 'I know what's coming. I know what you will face. So I taught you in the past, I'm warning you now, and I'm commending you to God:

Acts 20:32 "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

And then, to really drive the message home, he reminds them that he's doing this all out of love, not for profit. He says:

33 I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. 34 Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. 35 I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

Now, in order to understand this, you have to remember the times. Before the iPhone was released in 2007, before the Internet, before TV and radio, before the printing press was invented in 1450, everything was written by hand on scrolls one at a time, and they were expensive.

There was no Netflix or YouTube in the Ancient Roman world. So people listened to other people speak, tell stories or teach as a form of entertainment, education, or amusement. This is why you had schools of philosophers and traveling orators who earned money by sharing their stories or ideas.

Paul says, you know I'm not like that. I'm not going around sharing stories about Jesus as an entertainer, this isn't how I make my living. It's not a job - it's the truth, and I'm willing to work and suffer for it.

And, he's telling them, you should do the same - avoid the love of money and comfort, make life about others, not yourself. In his other letters Paul would say that churches should support their pastors, that they should not have to work outside the ministry, but he also says, in each of his lists of ministry qualifications, that pastors should be free from the love of money. That's true in the church, but also in the home and the government. Leaders should be concerned about others not just themselves. Parents and politicians, as well as pastors, should look for ways to use resources for others and not just themselves.

And because Paul had obviously done a good job with these things, there was a powerful bond between him and the people he met with, notice how they part.

36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, 38 sorrowing

most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.

So, we said you need at least three things to survive difficult times: learning, leadership, and the Lord. We spoke about each of those as we went along but now let's go back and make some focused observations.

First, in order to survive difficult times you need learning. You need knowledge, wisdom, understanding – a way to make sense of what's going on, truth to guide you. That's one of the things that makes our current crisis so hard – we've never done anything like this. There are no lessons to learn from. What did we do the last time we shut down schools for an entire semester. Oh wait, we haven't done that in at least 100 years, if ever.

And, to be fair, you can't always know what will come or how to respond. But whenever it's possible, we try. After any major crash involving an airplane there is a complete investigation into exactly what happened, what went wrong, did mechanical failures occur? How? Were there any human errors? And then they write up a huge report so that lessons can be learned for future designs and training.

Think of a coach watching videos of opposing teams. Before your team plays the Bulldogs the coach watches videos of the Bulldogs playing other teams and tries to figure out a strategy to defeat them.

And people try to do this for us all the time – they pass along their experience, their story, what it was like for them when they went through that thing, and sometimes we receive it, but sometimes we just roll our eyes or smile and think OK, sure, thanks.

Well, Paul knew challenging times lay ahead for the Christians in Ephesus, so he taught them for three years. He told them everything he knew. He kept nothing back.

He said, vs 26 (cont) *I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.*

And, he told them to be on the lookout for difficult days, he said, (vs 31) *watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.*

But now that he was leaving he said (vs 32): *I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*

There were things they needed to learn, so he taught them, and then He commended to the word of God's grace SO THAT they would have all these things to lean on in the middle of difficult days.

My friends, we are in challenging times, difficulties abound and so does uncertainty. But one of the passages of Scripture we have referred to time and time again during this crisis

is **Hebrews 13:8** Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Our circumstances change, but God does not.

Paul told the Ephesians everything he knew about God, he held nothing back, because he knew they would need the knowledge of God, the things they had learned about God, in order to get through their difficult days. And all of the things Paul taught them are kept in Scripture for us today. The things in this book are true in all places, at all times, under all circumstances. They are here to comfort us, guide us, encourage us, and even correct and rebuke us when necessary.

Just a few years after Paul had this meeting, he would write a letter to Timothy who was now serving as one of the pastors in Ephesus, reminding him:

2 Tim 3:16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

So let me ask: are you thoroughly equipped for every good work? Are you receiving the learning you need from God in order to face the challenges in your life? Where do you turn for answers?

There are questions that you cannot ask Google, Siri, or Alexa. Important questions, about the deepest issues of life. But you can turn to Scripture.

There are things God wants you to know. Promises He wants you to cling to. There are passages in Scripture that have kept people going the darkest days of human history. There are things for you to learn from Scripture that will encourage your soul, and things you can use to encourage others.

Have you learned what you need to know, and how to apply it to the difficulties you face?

Well, learning is one thing we need, but so is leadership.

Paul knows difficult days are coming for the church, so he calls for the leadership team. These are the pastors, elders, bishops, overseers – we saw last week these are all different titles, preferred by different churches today, but Scripture makes no distinction between them. Here in Acts 20 Paul calls for the elders, says the Holy Spirit has made them overseers – the same word as bishops - and then encourages them to “shepherd” the flock, which is where we get the title pastor.

Difficult days are coming and these men have an important role to play – they are part of God’s plan to help people survive difficult times.

Notice, the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. In Ephesians 4 we learn that:

Ephesians 4:11 ... [Jesus] gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,

Church, God gives you leaders. And He gives them the responsibility of watching over your souls.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

This is God's design. But let's be honest – there's a part of us that resists that. In part because this is the 21st century and this is America, we're independent people and we like equality, not hierarchy. Besides, we've seen leaders in the church that aren't worth following. We've seen pastors and priests do things that were scandalous, sinful, and criminal. We've seen church leaders fall.

Friends, church leaders do fall. Sometimes they fall because of their own foolishness and wicked desires. But sometimes they fall because Satan takes them out with intentional plotting, planning and scheming knowing that if he can take down one leader, he can discourage and disappoint hundreds or even thousands of others. You know that one of the primary missions of snipers is to take out leaders and cause chaos among the troops, right? Why does the US government target the leaders of terrorist organizations? To break the organization apart, distract current leaders who wonder if they're next, and discourage new people from aspiring to leadership roles.

So, pray for your leaders. And leaders, take your role seriously, you're capable of sabotaging yourself and you're in the sites of the enemy. So, Paul says, (vs 28)

take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Leaders, at all levels, whether you're the mini-pastor of a micro flock in your home, or the women's Bible study group leader, or a youth volunteer, the principle still applies: take heed to yourself – watch your walk and your reputation.

The United States Marine Corps has eleven leadership principles and number one is: know yourself, and seek self-improvement. That's their number one principal for leading others – know yourself and seek self-improvement. Leading others starts with leading yourself. So, leaders, take heed to yourself, pay careful attention, be alert. It helps you and then enables you to help others.

And notice the job leaders have – to shepherd the flock of God. To watch over them on hot, humid, summer days and on cold, miserable, winter nights. In all seasons, under all conditions, your job is to watch over, to love, and to lead others. Jesus is the Senior

Shepherd, but He deputizes you and charges you to watch over some of the people that belong to Him.

When you stumble through personal choices or outside temptations, other people suffer. They need your leadership, you're supposed to take heed to yourself and them, and it starts by watching out for yourself, by God's grace and with His help – welcome to the weight, and privilege, of leadership.

But let's flip this around and notice: Christian, if you're a sheep, God has given you shepherds. There are leaders in your life, called, equipped, and appointed by God to shepherd you. They don't own you. God does. He purchased you with His own blood. They don't control you. But they have a responsibility to watch over you, encourage you, feed you, care for you and care about you.

Think of that. Know that. Understand that. Because it means you are not alone on difficult days. In difficult seasons. Jesus is your primary shepherd but He and the Holy Spirit have appointed under-shepherds to care about what is happening to you.

So let me say something about that appointment before we move on. God gives leaders to the church. He makes overseers. And 1 Timothy chapter 3 says if you desire to be an overseer, you desire a good work. Three of you men have expressed that desire in the past. If there are others, we want to hear from you. If you think God is making you into something, speak up.

And I want to be super clear and transparent about something here. Right now all six of our elders are white. That wasn't by purpose or design. It just is what it is.

But it doesn't reflect the diversity of our congregation or our community. We are aware of that, we are praying about that, asking God to raise up a greater diversity of men to love and lead this flock.

But notice – we, the existing elders, don't make people overseers. God does. And that happens two ways. The man senses the calling and the church confirms it. He might sense it, but if it's not confirmed by the church, that's a problem. Or, the church might ask him to serve and if he doesn't have a deep internal conviction, a sense of calling, that's a problem. They both need to come together as confirmation that yes, God is making you an overseer, an elder, a pastor.

And as clearly as I can say this – you need to be praying about that, regardless of how much or how little you look like the men who are currently serving. We are interested in praying with you, studying with you, training you, to fulfill the role God has for you. The church has needs and God meets them through shepherds. Is that you? If so, or even if you're not sure and you want to talk about it, please, let me know I am happy to do it.

OK, back on track - we've said that when we go through difficult days, we need learning and we need leaders, both of which God provides – He has given us the Scriptures and pastors,

but both of these just point us back toward our ultimate need, which is God Himself, our Lord. Learning, leaders, and our Lord – these are the things we need in difficult days.

Notice, Paul says I'm leaving,

Acts 20:32 “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Difficult seasons come in this life – whether ravenous wolves who bring opposition from the outside, or smooth-talking tempters who seek to pull you under their influence. Whether it's political upheaval, civil unrest, financial crashes, or global pandemics, difficult times come. And there are all kinds of things we think we need to get through them, but underneath, over, around, and through it all, what we really need is the mercy of God and the word of His grace which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

My friends, do you know His goodness? Do you know His grace? Do you lean on Him in your difficulties? Do you turn to Him in the darkness? Do you seek wisdom from Him when you are confused? Do you find comfort in Him when you are hurting?

God is for you. He is working things together for your good. When, where, and how, has God hurt you?

Oh sure, you might have an unanswered prayer or two, or three...hundred, there might be some things you wish He had done, but He didn't. Or, He hasn't yet. There might be some things you wish He hadn't let happen. But think about this: was that God? Was He the one hurting you?

Or was it ravenous wolves? Was it people who led you astray? Was it your own foolish or sinful choices? Bad things happen in the world. Paul told the Ephesians they would. And so he pointed them to things they had learned, the leadership they had been given, and the Lord who orchestrated it all.

My friends, there are difficulties in this life – but God has purchased a flock with His own blood, appointed shepherds, and pours out his grace.

Paul speaks of it all so beautifully in Romans chapter 8, recognizing the hardships of this life, but also the indisputable, uncontestable, undefeatable goodness of God encouraging Christians to trust in Him, rest in Him, turn to Him as they go through troubling times:

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose. 29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. 30 Moreover whom He predestined,

these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *can be* against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? 33 Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is* God who justifies. 34 Who *is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written:

*"For Your sake we are killed all day long;
We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."*

37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the God Paul commended the Ephesians to.

Do you know Him? If so, join us as we celebrate communion together – we receive reminders of Jesus' body and blood that were given for us, we touch and taste reminders of the price that was paid for us, and in the process we find refreshment and nourishment, not for our bodies, this meal is too small, but for our souls.

If you don't know this God, may I ask: why not? He is calling out to you. He invites you in. There is no one who cannot come to God, there are only people who will not come to God. Your pride, your sin, your foolish choices have kept you away from God so far, why would you let them keep you away any longer? The door is open, you are invited in. Just tell God, in your own words, in your own way – Father, have mercy on me, a sinner, if these things are true, take me in.

And He will. He absolutely will. He will receive you, right here, right now, but will you receive Him?

Let's pray.