

COVENANT — THE NEW COVENANT

Reminders from Ephesians

LESSON 08

JULY 26, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Acts 20

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 20:28–31

²⁸Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

²⁹For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

³⁰Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

³¹Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

Covenant calls us to follow the example of our Spirit-led, Spirit-filled leaders.

MY RESPONSE TO COVENANT

I will be faithful to my spiritual disciplines and church attendance.

COVENANT CONTEXT

We have journeyed through the Bible to arrive at this place where we are in covenant relationship with Jesus through the gospel. Our journey is not over; it has just begun. Now that we are in covenant, Paul taught throughout the letters he wrote, such as the letter to the Ephesians, how to live in covenant with God and with each other.

TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: What leaders or teachers have made a profound impact in your life? What made their impact so lasting?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to Paul's impact on the church at Ephesus and the leaders there.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection. (I)

I. PAUL'S CALL FOR THE EPHESIAN LEADERS

A. Paul's Godly Example

B. Paul's Godly Teaching (V)

DISCUSS: *What role does teaching play in the discipleship of believers?*

C. I will endeavor to leave a legacy of living the gospel before others.

DISCUSS: *How are you continuing the spiritual legacy of those before you?*

II. PAUL’S FIRMLY-WORDED REMINDER

A. An Established Church

DISCUSS: *Once you have been saved, in what ways are you established and strengthened in your faith?*

B. A Persistent Problem

C. As part of the body of Christ, I will remember I have a covenant responsibility to every member.

DISCUSS: *How do you communicate to others that they belong?*

III. THE POWER AND PRIVILEGE OF BEING IN COVENANT

A. A Prayer for Human Strength

B. A Celebration of God’s Strength

DISCUSS: *How does God work through the church community to strengthen our faith?*

C. I will not live below my privilege as a child of God.

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to establish our lives on a strong foundation of truth
- For God to help us lead others by our godly example

LESSON CONNECTION

(I) The last known words of certain dying individuals have been memorialized for their wit, thoughtfulness, or tragedy. Before his death, French Grammarian Dominique Bouhours said, “I am about to—or I am going to—die: either expression is correct.” Former Prime Minister Winston Churchill, a man renowned for his war-time leadership and inspirational rhetoric, punctuated his passing by saying, “I’m bored with it all.” The death of Leonardo Da Vinci, painter of the *Mona Lisa* and the *Last Supper*, was recorded by the biographer Giorgio Vasari. While his exact wording is not known, Da Vinci is said to have died shortly after professing, “I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have.” Thomas J. Grasso, a murderer on death row, concluded his life with a public complaint, stating, “I did not get my Spaghetti-O’s; I got spaghetti. I want the press to know this” (mentalfloss.com, “65 People and Their Famous Last Words”).

Of the many famous last words recorded or fabricated, one story in particular stands out of a man famous for his alleged last words. Nathan Hale was a Yale alumnus and a schoolmaster living in Connecticut during the American Revolution. In 1775 Hale joined the militia and, soon after, was moved to Manhattan to defend New York City from the British loyalists. In August of 1776 the American patriots were rapidly losing control of the city. While Hale waited in Manhattan, willing to be of use to his new nation, patriot forces lost the battle of Long Island. Just over a week later Hale volunteered to go behind enemy lines as a spy to collect information for strategic attacks. He disguised himself as a teacher and investigated enemy movements on Long Island where patriot forces had recently

been defeated and expelled. As an eager twenty-one-year-old without any training in undercover surveillance, he drew attention and was captured by the British after only nine days.

Condemned as a spy, Hale was executed without a trial and buried in an unmarked grave. According to tradition, Nathan Hale's last words were a final statement of patriotism: "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country." His last words were a paraphrase from the 1713 play *Cato*, which praised the death of the virtuous youth and inspired many patriots of the era. While his mission was cut short, Nathan Hale succeeded at inspiring future generations of soldiers and leaders to greet challenges with the same sacrificial spirit (www.frauncestavernmuseum.org, "Nathan Hale's Letter to His Brother, Enoch Hale").

When Paul called for the Ephesian leaders on his way to Jerusalem, he knew he had to make his final face-to-face statements count. Paul reflected on his history with them and provided instruction and inspiration for the future. From some of Paul's "famous last words," we can gain insight into our own process of spiritual formation.

BIBLE LESSON

I. PAUL'S CALL FOR THE EPHESIAN LEADERS

A. Paul's Godly Example

The Christian community in Ephesus was established when Paul came and found some disciples of John the Baptist in Acts 19. After Paul shared the gospel, those disciples were baptized and received the Spirit. Paul preached and taught in Ephesus for three years, converting both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 20:31). While he was in Ephesus, Paul felt God was leading him to continue to travel: first through Macedonia and Greece, onward to Jerusalem, and eventually to Rome (Acts 19:21). On the way back from Macedonia, Paul was in a hurry to make it to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. He called for the Ephesian leaders to meet him so he could bid them farewell and offer some reminders and final face-to-face instructions.

Paul reminded the Ephesian leaders that from the first day he came and in all seasons, he had set an example for them of humble service (Acts 20:18–19). Even though the Jews rejected him, Paul labored long each day teaching God's Word—sometimes fostering success and sometimes fomenting a riot. But through it all Paul's character and message were consistent. Rather than ask for payment from the Ephesians for preaching the gospel to them, Paul worked with his hands, providing for himself and those with him. As a leader Paul could confidently state that his sacrificial lifestyle reinforced the message he proclaimed.

B. Paul's Godly Teaching

Although we do not have a service schedule from Paul's years with the Ephesian church, we see here a pattern for our preaching and teaching today. Much of the Book of Acts was the church preaching to sinners to teach them how to be right with God. But here we see Paul preaching to the church, teaching them how to live now that they had been made right with God. To be fully mature disciples of Jesus, we must have both: preaching to saints and to sinners. After we are born again, God's preached and taught Word will continue to call us to covenant faithfulness.

Paul warned the Ephesian leaders that false teachers would come from within and without, making false disciples. For about three months Paul preached to Jews and debated in the synagogue until many rejected his message and

began publicly ridiculing the gospel. Paul moved on to the school of Tyrannus where he taught daily for two years. He also taught “from house to house” in Ephesus (Acts 20:20). Because of Paul’s consistent teaching in public halls and in private homes, “all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:10). Paul exemplified the need for corporate and private worship: Discipleship combines worship in God’s house and in our house. A fully formed disciple cannot have one without the other.

(V) Paul tackled tough topics as he declared to the Ephesians “all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:26–27). He preached and taught all he believed God wanted His church to know. We should do the same. Part of his teaching called the leaders to watch out, not only for themselves, but also for the church. Preserving the doctrinal integrity of the church involved keeping an eye out for “wolves” who taught lies as the Ephesian leaders fed God’s flock the true Word of God. Though their missionary was leaving, the discipleship of the church would continue as the Ephesians’ leadership committed to protecting the church and preserving the truth.

***DISCUSS:** What role does teaching play in the discipleship of believers?*

C. I will endeavor to leave a legacy of living the gospel before others.

A prophet named Agabus warned Paul that he was facing imprisonment if he traveled to Jerusalem. Paul realized he would never see the Ephesians again after his journey. This statement grieved the leaders who wept and embraced their beloved pastor one last time before seeing him off to his ship. Christian disciples have teachers and leaders who have made a profound impact on our lives. While these exemplary individuals may not all be present with us the rest of our lives, their influence is felt in the beliefs we cherish, our approach to ministry, and the confidence they give us to live for the Lord.

Paul finished his farewell by reminding the leaders of Jesus’ words: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Godly leaders connect others back to the gospel message, and in their absence, those believers can be anchored to the words and actions of Jesus, the ultimate giver. Let us follow Jesus’ and Paul’s instructions to give of our finance, time, and talents to help disciple other new believers.

***DISCUSS:** How are you continuing the spiritual legacy of those before you?*

II. PAUL’S FIRMLY-WORDED REMINDER

A. An Established Church

After Paul left, he wrote his letter to the Ephesian church, referring to himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. This letter is known as the Book of Ephesians, which Paul addressed to “the saints...at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus,” and he reminded them of their new-birth experience (Ephesians 1:1). The Ephesians had heard the gospel, responded through repentance and water baptism in Jesus’ name, and God sealed them with His Holy Spirit, which was the earnest (down payment) of their heavenly inheritance (Ephesians 1:13–14). Like a wax seal that marked official ownership, their receiving the Spirit signaled they belonged to Jesus.

Although their initial salvation experience had radically changed their lives and given them a brand-new status as children of God, Paul knew the Ephesians had more potential for spiritual growth. While he commended their faith

in Christ and love for others, he also prayed for wisdom, revelation, understanding, and knowledge for them (Ephesians 1:17–18). The Ephesians had heard, experienced, and obeyed the gospel; it was time for them to grow in their understanding of how far and wide the gospel impacted their lives.

DISCUSS: *Once you have been saved, in what ways are you established and strengthened in your faith?*

B. A Persistent Problem

Paul reminded the Ephesians that they were without God, without hope, and far away but now have been brought near through the blood of Jesus Christ. They once were separated by a wall of division, but God has brought Jews and Gentiles together into one church. Before Jesus, the lines were clearly drawn around “us” versus “them,” but not anymore because the Cross eliminated those divisions. Whenever the first Gentiles were converted, Peter, his companions, and the church council at Jerusalem were convinced the Gentiles could be saved simply because the Gentiles had been born again like the disciples had at the beginning (Acts 10:45–46; 11:17–18).

The Holy Spirit was more than just a “get-into-Heaven-free” pass. Defying social norms, the gospel made a unified community of Jewish and Gentile believers possible. Paul gladly affirmed the Gentile believers and celebrated their invitation into God’s family. When the epistle was read in the hearing of the whole church, Paul’s message would have surely been overheard loud and clear by any skeptical Jewish believers: “Everyone belongs here.” Jewish believers needed to accept their Gentile brothers and sisters, and Gentile believers needed to recognize they belonged.

C. As part of the body of Christ, I will remember I have a covenant responsibility to every member.

In Ephesians Paul called the church to oneness. He reminded them that “There is one body, and one Spirit,...one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4:4–6). The oneness of God is a theological reality we celebrate, but the oneness of the church is something we must actively live. Various personal and cultural boundary markers can fracture our oneness, whether it be race, social status, gender, age, or simply differing personalities. But since God has allowed us to be part of His people, we must also cheerfully receive others in the name of Jesus.

DISCUSS: *How do you communicate to others that they belong?*

III. THE POWER AND PRIVILEGE OF BEING IN COVENANT

A. A Prayer for Human Strength

Paul prayed that the church would be strengthened by the Spirit in their inner being. Worldly examples of strength in ancient Rome were found in politicians who commanded god-like obedience, exercising domination and sometimes cruelty over the people they ruled. Similarly, athletes committed themselves to regimented exercise, sacrificing basic pleasures for a show of strength and a moment of honor. However, Christian strength is more than a show because it works within us, enabling us to endure in the faith and faithfully witness despite difficulties.

Upon his departure, Paul had committed the Ephesian leaders to the word of God’s grace, which could and would build them up (Acts 20:32). Paul envisioned a growing and strengthening church in Ephesus. Spiritual strength is

only produced when we abide in the Spirit, obey God's Word, and live in harmony with God's church. Paul recommended the gifts of spiritual leaders that prepare the church for ministry and build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–12). Present-day believers are strengthened through spiritual disciplines, examples of leaders who live and teach the gospel, and examples of leaders scribed in Scripture.

B. A Celebration of God's Strength

Paul prayed for the church's strength while celebrating God's strength. Listen to Paul's fascination with God's excelling ability: "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us" (Ephesians 3:20). Exceeding, abundantly, above all—God is greater than we can imagine, and He chooses to work through us. The greatest privilege in the world is being in covenant relationship with Jesus.

God continues to sanctify us (make us holy) through His Holy Spirit, cleansing us from sin and helping us to accurately mirror His nature. God also empowers us to serve others, strengthening us for ministry and confirming His word with signs and wonders. Paul envisioned the way the church will function like one mature body, not contending for our own views that divide the body (Ephesians 4:13–14). Yes God works in me, but the work of God is exponentially marvelous in us. When we strengthen and cooperate with one another, we are not easily swayed by deception. Instead of children who are easily tricked by false messages, we will grow up with the right family resemblance, acting just like our Father, Jesus Christ.

***DISCUSS:** How does God work through the church community to strengthen our faith?*

C. I will not live below my privilege as a child of God.

Sometimes we all need to be reminded who we really are. When a child misbehaves, a parent might remind the child, "That is not how we act in this family." Likewise, when giving a generous gift, parents may explain by stating, "It's because you are my child." The same is true in the family of God; we sometimes need to remember the relationship.

Living in restored relationship with God means we are called to live holy and above the dregs of sin. Paul told the Ephesians not to walk "as other Gentiles walk," pursuing vanity and uncleanness (Ephesians 4:17–19). Instead, they were to "put off...the old man" and "put on the new man," which is to take off the old identity as children of darkness and put on the new identity as children of God (Ephesians 4:22–24). Family privileges include direct access to God and strength through His Spirit, a growing knowledge of His love, a new purpose for living, and communion and connection within the body.

***Teacher Option:** Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how the gospel tears down all the dividing walls and unifies us in one body in Christ Jesus.*

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

(I) One of history's most iconic moments started off as a miscommunication. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall

still stood to divide the free, prosperous West Germany from the oppressed, communist East Germany. The wall had stood for nearly thirty years, but on that November night, freedom was in the air. One of the East German officials, Günter Schabowski, held a press conference after the pressure and protests mounted for East Germans to travel to the west. Schabowski was not quite ready for the presser, but he knew he needed to do something.

He read an announcement he had just received that promised East Germany would loosen travel restrictions. Without giving much detail into how much or when, one of the journalists asked the German official when these travel restrictions would be loosened, and Schabowski replied, “As far as I know, effective immediately, without delay.” That was a miscommunication—the officials were working on processes and delays to keep from releasing too much power—but his announcement was broadcast live.

When the East Germans heard his promise, they believed the border was open and they were free to cross over into West Germany. That was all they needed to hear. Within hours—after being divided for nearly three decades from their neighbors to the west—thousands of East Berliners overwhelmed the wall’s security checkpoints. The border guards were also unprepared for such a flood of freedom-hungry humanity. The guards radioed for instructions but they heard little in return. It became obvious that they could not hold back the growing crowd.

At one particular border crossing, the senior officer in charge, Harald Jäger, kept calling his superiors, but they were no help. Just one-half hour before midnight that night, Jäger changed history: He simply opened the gates. Hundreds and thousands of East Berliners streamed through the open gates into the bright lights and celebrations of West Berliners. They hugged each other and celebrated freedom’s win that Thursday night in 1989. Families and friends who had been separated by a 12-foot high, 87-mile long concrete and barbed wire wall held each other again, thankful that the wall was finally coming down.

That was part of Paul’s message in Ephesians and still God’s message today: The wall has come down. The wall that separated the Jews from the Gentiles in the Temple in Jerusalem has come down. The 4-inch-thick, 60-foot-tall veil that separated all humanity from our holy God has come down. The wall between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, bond and free, male and female has come down because of the gospel, and everyone is invited into covenant relationship with Jesus Christ.

As God’s church, let us live faithful to our covenant relationship with God. Let us be faithful to our spiritual disciplines, to worshiping with our brothers and sisters, and to looking for people like us and not like us because everyone is welcome in the kingdom of God.