

## Final Words and a Tearful Goodbye

Acts of the Apostles

Acts 20:17-38

October 8, 2017

*<sup>17</sup> Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. <sup>18</sup> And 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, <sup>19</sup> serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; <sup>20</sup> how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, <sup>21</sup> testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. <sup>24</sup> But 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. <sup>25</sup> And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, <sup>27</sup> for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. <sup>28</sup> Pay 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. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. <sup>32</sup> And 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. <sup>33</sup> I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> In 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.'* ”**

***<sup>36</sup> And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. <sup>37</sup> And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, <sup>38</sup> being 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.***

Paul's mission in Asia is coming to an end. He had spent many years in Asia, much of that in Ephesus. Now, Paul is going to stop off in Asia one last time on his way home from southern Greece and Macedonia. It will be a short visit with the Ephesian church leaders. This is a very moving and emotional meeting. That is our focus this morning.

But, before we jump into the passage, let me get you up to speed, because a lot has happened since last week. When we left Paul last week, he was in Ephesus. A riot had broken out and 25,000 people had flooded into the theater chanting, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.” All of this was a clear indication of the effectiveness of the ministry of Paul and his team. They had stormed Asia with the gospel so effectively that Alexander the silversmith had been led to say, *“not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people...”* I love how God consistently uses the opponents of gospel to speak some of the most profound truths about the gospel. God’s plan was being unveiled in Asia.

Once the riot calmed down, Paul left Ephesus and headed for Macedonia. This is where Philippi is located. Philippi is where the initial gospel invasion of Europe had occurred. Remember Lydia the merchant, the demon possessed slave girl and the town jailer were the first converts. Paul is headed back to Philippi to encourage the church and make sure it is doing well. He will work his way south to Thessalonica, Berea and ultimately Corinth in the far south of Greece. Paul spent three months in Corinth. Remember, he had sent Timothy and Erastus on ahead with a letter... the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. Paul was taking an offering, from the Asian and European churches, to the church at Jerusalem. Each church had sent representatives to travel with Paul. They are listed in the first verses of Acts 20. It is during his stay in Corinth that we believe Paul wrote his

magnum opus, the letter to the Romans. It was in the context of the issues in the Corinthian church that Paul sat down and put his deepest theological thoughts to paper. We should stop to realize something here. Theology matters. Paul knew that so well. What we know about God, what we believe about God... who he is, what he is like, how he thinks, what he requires from us... it is all so important. The Corinthians had been out of control. Their theology was faulty, consequently their practices were faulty. While in Corinth, Paul was challenged to think deeply about what he knew to be true about God and the gospel. His contribution to Christianity can never be underestimated. The Book of Romans is the pinnacle of his writings.

And now, Paul decides to leave Corinth and sail back to Syria so he can be in Jerusalem by the Passover. But just before he sailed, Paul became aware of a plot to kill him. It is likely they intended to kill him on the ship, as he sailed with other Jewish pilgrims who were heading to Jerusalem. So, Paul changed his plans and took the land route, back up north to Macedonia, retracing his earlier steps and making one last swing through these European churches. The European invasion had been a tremendous success and the churches were thriving, even Corinth! The first half of Acts 20 gives the brief details of Paul's journey and contains the story of Eutychus, the young man who fell asleep during Paul's long sermon and fell out of a third story window. Fortunately for you, we meet on a single level

with windows that don't open! Just so you know, Paul's sermon was four hours! Just saying.... Four hours!

That brings us to our passage. We pick it up in Acts 20:17. I want to walk through verse by verse today as we look at Paul's farewell to the church in Ephesus. These are final words and tearful goodbye! Please open your Bible to Acts 20:17 so you can follow along. Paul starts with a testimony.

### **Paul's Testimony**

**V.17** -- Paul had intentionally bypassed Ephesus so he would not be delayed and possibly to avoid any conflict with the town council. However, he knew he would never see the leaders of the church again and he had some things to say to them. Paul was passionate about this final tour of the churches in Greece, Macedonia and now Asia. In Troas, he had preached for hours... then stayed up all night talking with the leaders. These were not light social conversations. Paul was preparing these believers for very difficult trials that were on the horizon.

Then, Paul sailed for Asia. He bypassed Ephesus and stopped in Miletus and sent for the Ephesian elders. Miletus was 20-30 miles south of Ephesus.

**V.18-19** – Paul loved the Ephesians. He reminds them how he had served them, even though the Jews had opposed him at every step. He was jailed, beaten and conspired against. Yet, Paul says that he served with humility and tears. This is the only time that Paul uses the word "humble" to

describe himself. Humility, or the lack thereof, is a very great danger to church leaders. Proverbs 16:18 says, <sup>18</sup> *Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.* Paul is teaching these leaders. Follow my example. Be humble. Be compassionate. Serve one another with humility and tears. Don't let your position be a source of pride.

**V.20** – Paul then reminds the elders that his teaching was in public group settings and from house to house. He used the hall of Tyrannus and used the homes of believers. But his message was consistent. He did not shrink back. He did not fear man or the consequences of teaching what is "profitable." This word means "to be advantageous, to be better off, to be to someone's advantage."<sup>1</sup> Paul tells the leaders, "be strong, don't shrink back, teach them what is to their advantage... not what they want to hear." This is critical advice to anyone who would teach in the church.

**V.21** – Paul's teaching showed no partiality. Luke wants us to see that. God shows no partiality among people. Jew or Greek, light or dark skin, rich or poor, strong or weak... there is no group of persons who warrant more or less light from God. Paul preached to them all, and he preached the same message to all... repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. This is critically important. Paul says that his message is repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. These need to be expanded and explained.

**Repentance:** A total change of mind that leads to a total change of life. This change of mind relates to our thinking about sin and righteousness. Repentance is associated with forgiveness in scripture. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. (Mk. 1:4) Jesus explained that he would rise from the dead on the third day so that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name. (Luke 24:46) Repentance, a change of mind, is possible because Jesus died in our place and then rose from the dead, victorious over sin and death on our behalf.

But listen carefully. Repentance and sorrow over our sin are two different things. Repentance is not an emotion and sorrow is not repentance. Repentance is an action, not a feeling. It that can carry strong emotion, but at its core it is a mindset change not a feeling. Being sorry for our sin is not repentance. DO NOT get these confused. Do not think that because you are sorry that you are repentant and therefore forgiven by God. Repentance comes with a change of heart and a change of actions. Repentance is demonstrated over time in a change in the way you think, act and talk. Sorrow is not repentance.

**Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ:** But, repentance that leads to forgiveness, on its own, is not enough to make us right with God. We are unrighteous sinners, dead in our sin and in rebellion towards God. When we repent and turn away from our sin, we are forgiven by God but still spiritually dead and unable to do what is right. Repentance means that we have

turned away from our belief that we are the ultimate rulers of our life, but repentance by itself would leave us adrift with no new direction. Where do we then turn? In what do we have trust? We need more than forgiveness to have eternal life, we need righteousness. When we have faith in Jesus, we receive his righteousness. It is "imputed to us." Leon Morris says this, "Faith is the attitude whereby a man abandons all reliance in his own efforts to obtain salvation, be they deeds of piety, of ethical goodness or anything else. It is the attitude of complete trust in Christ, of reliance on him alone for all that salvation means." <sup>2</sup>

Faith is an absolute assurance you can trust someone, that you have absolute confidence in them. To have faith is to have an assurance, even proof that you can absolutely rely on a person's character... that they will never one time let you down or fail to do what they say. We are saved by faith in Jesus and through faith we received His righteousness.

So, we need both repentance and faith. That is what Paul says in verse 21. He testified to the Jews and Greeks: Repent and be forgiven. Turn away from faith in yourself, in others, in the world. God forgives you when you repent. Then, have faith in Jesus who is Lord (King) and Christ (Savior). Here is the one you can absolutely trust, the one who will never, ever abandon you or fail you. Repentance and faith - these are the essential elements of the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation.

Paul's testimony continues in verses 22-23.

**V.22-23** -- Paul says he is constrained or "bound by the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem. The word here means "to be compelled or forced." He did not know what would happen, but he knew there was something waiting for him in Jerusalem. Like Jesus, when turned his face like flint toward Jerusalem, Paul knew he had to go, yet he also knew prison and affliction waited for him there. He wasn't wrong!

**V.24** -- My life is not my own, it is of no value apart from Christ. Die to yourself and live for Christ. Paul's only concern is that he finish the race, the good works that the Lord Jesus had prepared for him beforehand... (Eph. 2:10) Paul's good works were to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. These are the same good works that God has prepared beforehand for us! We do not have to wait to "hear from God" or have the Spirit whisper in our ears or have gold dust fall from the sky ... right here is your life purpose if you call yourself a disciple of Jesus Christ.

**V.33-35** – We are still looking at Paul's testimony... so jump to verses 33-35. Paul didn't want their money... and they had money! Clearly the implication is that these elders had resources, but Paul had never imposed upon them. He kept the gospel free of any charge that it was for sale. He worked with his hands, making and mending tents, to provide for himself and for those who were travelling with him. This is not Paul putting himself forward as some kind of hero. He is saying to these elders, "live the same way!" Put nothing in the way of the gospel. Not your lifestyle, not your money... nothing. Work hard elders. Work hard and use your money to

support your needs and to support the needs of the weak, those who cannot provide for themselves.

Then Paul says something that is very interesting. He quotes Jesus. But it is a quote that is not recorded anywhere in the gospels. Quoting Jesus, Paul says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

### **Final Instructions**

Now Paul turns to the heart of his message. These are his final instructions to leaders of the church in Asia.

**V.25** – First he says, "You will never see my face again." Wow... what a shock that must have been, it is a strong statement. But it gets stronger.

**V.26-27** -- I am innocent of your blood (if you reject Christ)... because I did not shrink back from declaring the whole counsel of God. All of Asia had been impacted by the gospel. Paul had made it clear... both the path to salvation and the path to destruction. Now it is in your hands. Don't fall away, keep the faith, stay the course... no matter what.

**V.28** -- Now Paul gets to the serious business at hand. He charges the elders to pay careful attention to themselves and all the flock. Pay attention to your lifestyle, to your obedience to the gospel. This is serious. Why is it serious? Because, Jesus bought the church with his blood and you are now responsible for his purchase, it is your responsibility.

This is extremely serious. We must pay attention to ourselves as leaders of the church! Jesus died and bought the church! He paid with his life. The price was ultimate. Jesus emptied himself and became a man. He suffered and died in our place. His sacrifice was beyond what we can imagine. He did this to purchase the church, his bride. Now these men are given the charge to care for that church with their lives.

The verse uses two words to describe the elders -- overseers and shepherds. (both the ESV and NIV fail here. They use the terms "care for" and "watch over" instead of "shepherd") In the Greek there are three terms in this passage that describe the same people:

Elders: presbyterous. Older ones.

Overseers: episkopos. Those that watch over.

Shepherd: poimaino The church is a flock of sheep. The pastor or shepherd is their guardian.

These words are used interchangeably throughout the NT to describe the leaders of the church who have been given a special office. All three mean the same person... and describe their function.

**V.29-30** -- Paul has good reason to give them a serious charge. As sure as he knows they will never see him again, he also knows that once he leaves the wolves will come. They won't spare the flock and they will come from within. Men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. This has not changed and we are not immune. This is real today.

Satan hates the church, those who are born of Jesus and make up his beloved bride. Wolves live everywhere and they look like sheep until they start to howl and bite. Paul encouraged these good men to be strong men, men who would give their lives to spare the flock from the wolves. Here is the test of good leadership... Jesus died to purchase the church. The least we can do is die defending it.

**V.31** -- Be alert. This is going to happen. Be prepared. Here is how to fight it... teach them to obey all that Jesus commanded night and day, with tears and compassion and strength. Love them enough to tell them the hard truth. Teach them to obey, even when it hurts. That is the most loving and compassionate thing you can possibly do for the flock.

### **Paul's Prayer of Commission**

**V.32** – *And now, I commend you to God.* This is a beautiful thought. Paul is speaking favorably about them to God himself... I commend you to the sovereign God of the universe. I recommend you, I ask God to show you favor and to shower you with His attention. I commit you into His care, which will occur through the word of His grace. That word is able to build you up and make you strong... strong for the fight with the wolves, strong to lead, strong to teach, strong to persevere so you receive the inheritance among those who are being sanctified.

**V.36-37** – And that ends his speech, Paul was now through talking... he is on his knees with his friends. They had spent the better part of eight years

together, now they would never see one another again this side of heaven. They were all crying. They hugged Paul and kissed him. They were filled with sorrow over the loss of fellowship and the trials they knew their friend was facing... and likely the trials they now knew they would face.

**V.38** -- Paul's ministry in Asia ends as the Ephesian elders walk him to the waiting ship. Paul was headed for Tyre, and they knew they would never see him again.

### **Application**

If you had asked Paul how he thought his life would unfold prior to his three missionary trips, I doubt that his answer would have even come close to what actually happened. Three distinct trips into Asia (modern Turkey) and Greece. Beatings, assassination attempts, riots, rejection from the Jews... these must have been so hard. However, Paul saw God do things that were so astounding, so life changing and so world shaking that they could never have been predicted. Revival in Ephesus, all of Asia reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the opening of Europe to the gospel, churches in Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica, and Corinth. Thousands of lives redeemed and the foundation set in place for hundreds of millions more to come!

This month marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. A young monk, Martin Luther, had the audacity to read the scripture and open his heart to its truth. His questions, his insights into scripture... they

led to a revival of the true church after it had fallen into disrepair and disarray... some 1500 years after the apostles had set it in place, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Today, we stand in need of another reformation. A reformation that will lead us as a people back to the basic truths of scripture. We have ceased to read our Bibles and are now much like the people of Luther's day, the people of Paul's day... totally dependent on others to teach us and unable or unwilling to search out the truth ourselves. We have come to believe many things about scripture that simply are not true. Movements like the Bethel School of the Miraculous are teaching false doctrine to our coming generations. We are quickly becoming 'social Christians' who have been tamed down by catchy songs and flashy beliefs that void the gospel and make Christianity no more than a humanistic self-help program.

The wolves are among us. We must follow Paul's example and lead. We must lead well by carefully paying attention to ourselves and to the flock. The Holy Spirit has appointed me as an overseer. My job is not to tell you what you want to hear, but what God wants you to hear. Paul was not a super hero. He was a normal guy who God had a grip on. He wanted Jesus more than anything and the Spirit of God used him in ways we will never really comprehend. Millions of believers can trace their faith back to the foundations laid by the apostle Paul. So how will you live? How will I live? Jesus Christ shed his blood to purchase us, who call ourselves oneTreasure. Will we stand? Will we thrive? Will we proclaim his love to all people?

## **Benediction**

And now I commend you to God and the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. AMEN

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> L.N. 6544.

<sup>2</sup> L. L. Morris, "Faith," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 358.