

Acts 20:17-38: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 20 verses 17 to 38. Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 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, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

How I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

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 receive from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

[1 : 21] 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.

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. 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.

I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. 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.

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all, and there was much weeping on the part of all. They embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again.

[2 : 39] And they accompanied him to the ship. The second half of Acts chapter 20 contains a very important farewell speech from Paul to the Ephesian elders. He had worked in Ephesus for about three years, one of the longest single stretches of his ministry.

He had formed a school of disciples who had left the synagogue and gathered around him at the Hall of Tyrannus. Many Jews and Gentiles had been converted from across the whole region of Asia.

Now, knowing that he will never see them again, he instructs the elders concerning how they should carry on in the ministry. This speech provides a sort of formal close to his regular ministry before he is imprisoned.

It focuses upon Ephesus, but for the hero of Acts, it has a broader reference. It is a handing over of the ministry of the apostle to the ministry of the elders, from the first generation of the church to the second.

Robert Tannehill observes that there is a chiastic, or there and back again, structure to the sermon. Verses 18 to 19, You know, serving the Lord with all humility, is paralleled with verse 34, You know that these hands served.

[3 : 46] The second half of verse 18 to verse 20, The whole time, tears, in public and from house to house, is paralleled with verse 31, Three years, night and day, with tears.

Verse 20, I did not shrink from announcing, is paralleled with verse 27, I did not shrink from announcing. And verse 21 is paralleled with verse 24, Bearing witness and to bear witness. At the centre of this pattern in the text is the statement that the Holy Spirit is constraining him to go on to Jerusalem, where he knows that he will face persecution. Paul is presenting himself here as one who has faithfully fulfilled his charge.

It is reminiscent of 1 Samuel chapter 12, verses 1 to 5, where Samuel declares to Israel that he has been faithful in all that was committed to his charge. And Samuel said to all Israel, Behold, I have obeyed your voice in all that you have said to me, and have made a king over you.

And now, behold, the king walks before you, and I am old and grey. And behold, my sons are with you. I have walked before you from my youth until this day. Here I am.

[4 : 54] Testify against me before the Lord and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed?

Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me, and I will restore it to you. They said, You have not defrauded us, or oppressed us, or taken anything from any man's hand.

And he said to them, The Lord is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand. And they said, He is witness. Paul here is setting a model for the elders as well.

He is presenting the way that he has been faithful in his ministry, and he is thereby preparing them to be faithful in theirs. He seems to be especially concerned to absolve himself of any accusation of omission.

He has taught them every part of the message of God. He has taught them in every context, in public, and then also from house to house. He has taught every person, both Jews and Greeks.

[5 : 57] Every person is made aware of every part of the truth that they need to know, and he pursues them with a passion and a commitment. He is deeply emotionally involved in the task, with all humility and with tears and with trials.

He was doggedly determined that no scintilla of God's truth would pass any person by. As a minister, Paul is exemplary, and he presents himself as an example, and calls for other ministers to act as examples.

In Titus chapter 2 verses 7 to 8, In 2 Timothy chapter 3 verses 10 to 11, Paul is going on to Jerusalem.

Later the Holy Spirit will reveal his fate in Jerusalem, that he will be imprisoned. As Agabus the prophet, for instance, declares that he will be taken in chains, other disciples seek to dissuade him from going.

But here we see that the Holy Spirit is the one who first directs him to go. Paul's great concern is to be faithful in the task that he has been given. He does not account his life to be of value in and of itself.

[7 : 29] Rather, all that matters to him, whether it be by persecutions and sufferings and hardship, is that he will go on to complete his course, that he will do what God has called him to do, that he will end his race as a faithful servant.

Especially poignant is the fact that he will not see any of the faces of these men again. This is the last time that he will be with them. He knows that he is going on to afflictions and imprisonment. This is a final parting. Paul has poured out his life for these people for a number of years, and now, like a father declaring his final will and blessing, he is about to pass away, and they must take up the charge.

In his insistence that he is innocent of all of their blood, we should recall Ezekiel chapter 33, verses 1 to 9. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, and if he sees the sword coming upon the land, and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.

He heard the sound of the trumpet, and did not take warning. His blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming,

and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.

[9 : 05] So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.

But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Paul is especially concerned to vindicate himself from any charge of shrinking back, The danger for an overseer of a flock is to be obliging, not to upset people, particularly the people who are paying your bills.

It is very easy to think yourself speaking prophetically when you are speaking loudly about the sins of outsiders, but when you speak to the sins of insiders, you lose friends and alienate people.

In such situations, you may be tempted to shrink back, not to actually declare the word that needs to be declared. There are few people that we can be more afraid of than our friends.

And the danger of shrinking back also comes from outsiders too. Standing up to outsiders can lead to the possibility of persecution and attack. Standing up to insiders, to isolation and ostracisation.

[10 : 26] The Christian minister, the guardian of the flock, must be fearless in the face of both. He has been given the most serious of commissions, and he must discharge it faithfully. The portrayal of a shepherd here is not just someone with theological training and expertise.

While he is supposed to be emotionally involved at the deepest of levels with the congregation, he is not to be just a therapist and encourager. He is someone who is a guardian, a protector, someone who must be defined by love, courage, wisdom, and other such virtues, as he defends, and he provides for the flock.

He will lay down his life for the flock. That may not be in death, it may be in his labours. We can see the example of Paul here again. Paul was working tirelessly. He supported himself.

If the version of Acts chapter 19 verse 9 that gives the hours of his teaching is accurate, or if it at least communicates an original tradition, we get a sense of how tireless Paul was.

He would be providing for his own needs in the morning, presumably, working from daybreak until about 11 o'clock, and then teaching from 11 until about 4. We have another sense of his diligence in the meeting at Troas, where he will speak through the entirety of the night to make sure that no piece of God's truth escapes them, that they have everything that they need to go forward as he departs from the scene.

[11 : 46] We can think a lot about the sacrifice that it takes to lay down your life in martyrdom, or in suffering for other people. But Paul is an example of someone who's laying down his life in his labours, not just in his suffering.

Paul knows that he must faithfully perform his commission as a servant of God. Such work requires a mastery of oneself first. He teaches this to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 4 verse 16.

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. He will absolve himself of any blood that would be on his head.

He will also offer himself as a model and example to all the others. Paul is also drawing upon a greater model and presenting them with such a model in verse 28.

They must pay careful attention to themselves, they must guard their own lives, and in guarding that, they will be more equipped to guard the flock. But that flock has been committed to them by the Holy Spirit, and they are taking care of the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood, the blood of his own dearly beloved son.

[12 : 54] In this verse, we see the work of the Trinity in bringing the church together. The Holy Spirit has committed the ministry of the church to particular ministers. They are caring for the church of God the Father, the assembly that is named for him, that he obtained with the blood of his Son.

The Son laid down his life for this. The Holy Spirit has committed this charge to people. The charge is of the church of God, the church that is named by the Father, and it's a church that has been bought at the price of the Son's blood.

Could any commission be greater than this? Nothing is more important than being diligent and faithful in performing it. He warns them that a time is coming when fierce wolves will come in among

them.

These are presumably false shepherds and false teachers that will divide and devour the flock. These fierce wolves will seem to be driven by their own glory. They speak perverted things, and they're designed to draw people after themselves, to set up their own groups of disciples. Elsewhere in the New Testament, there are several warnings of the fact that false teachers will arise in the last days. As they near the time of judgment upon Jerusalem in AD 70, as they face rising persecution from Rome, they must be prepared for the descent of the wolves upon their flock. [14:09] Wolves that will seek to scatter and to devour. Paul's example of three years of tireless and passionate ministry is something that they must remember. They must be alert. Night or day, they need to be prepared.

We might recall the way that our Lord teaches his disciples to be prepared for false teachers and to be awake, as he delivers farewell instructions after three years of ministry among them. Paul is following once again the example of his master. He commends them to God. God is the one that will be able to protect them. As they look to the word of his grace, that will be able to build them up.

That will assure them of the inheritance that belongs to the people of God. He concludes his speech by stressing that he did not seek any material gain from them. He coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.

He worked with his own hands to support his ministry. This was not strictly necessary nor required of him, but he wanted to make clear to them that the ministry of the gospel was a gift, not something that was a means of gain for him.

[15:11] His concern was to build up the weak. False teaching in the gospel of Luke and in the book of Acts is often associated with a desire for money. It was a desire for money that led Judas astray.

It was a desire for money that led the scribes and the Pharisees to devour widows' houses. It was a desire for money that led Ananias and Sapphira to lie to the Holy Spirit. It was a desire for money and the offer of money that led Simon Magus to ask for the power of the Holy Spirit as if it were some magical power.

It was the desire for money that sparked so much of the opposition to Paul and his fellow missionaries from both Jews and Gentiles. They saw that their status and their trades were being threatened and as a result they opposed the gospel.

Paul is not driven by a desire for money. He's driven more than anything else with the desire to help the weak, to be faithful to his Lord and to follow the example that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Departing from them with prayer, with which people who are far distanced from each other can be held together in the unity of the Holy Spirit and with much weeping, embracing and kissing, Paul departs for the ship, never to see them again.

[16:22] A question to consider, drawing from the many different threads of this chapter, how should we describe the task of an elder and the virtues that he will need to perform it?

