

God's Unstoppable Mission, Part 8: Paul's Mission Strategy in Ephesus

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[0 : 00] When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and after encouraging them said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. He traveled through that area speaking many words of encouragement to the people and finally arrived in Greece where he stayed three months.

Because the Jews made a plot against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. He was accompanied by Silpeter, son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Pyrrhus and Trofimus from the province of Asia.

These men went on ahead and waited for us at Trofimus. But we sailed from Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread and five days later joined the others at Trofimus where we stayed seven days. On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting.

Seated in a window was a young man called Etecius who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on.

[1 : 30] When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him.

Don't be alarmed, he said. He's alive. Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos where we were going to take Paul aboard. He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot.

When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mithon. The next day we set sail from there and arrived off Pierce.

After that, we crossed over to Samus and on the following day, arrived at Miletus. Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible by the day of Pentecost.

[2 : 34] From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them, You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia.

I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but I have taught you publicly and from house to house.

I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.

I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men, for I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

[3 : 56] Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he had bought with his own blood. I know that

after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard. Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you, night and day with tears.

Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing.

You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak. For remembering the words of the Lord Jesus himself said, it is more blessed to give than to receive. When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.

[5 : 06] They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

This is the word of the Lord. Well, if you have your Bibles open in the book of Acts, chapter 20, we're going to have our last look in the book of Acts, looking at Paul's missionary journeys.

Next week, heading on up to Easter, we're going to think about why did Jesus suffer and die, thinking about answers that we have for that from the book of Hebrews.

But we're going to focus our attention this evening, particularly on what Paul says to the elders in Ephesus. In a sense, we're going to review Paul's mission strategy that he shares with the elders in Ephesus.

So for the last few weeks, we've been on something of a whistle-stop tour of Paul's mission. We've seen him in Asia. We've seen him in Europe. We've seen him proclaiming wherever he goes, Jesus Christ is Lord.

[6 : 13] We've seen lots of opposition, but we've also seen lots of people from different backgrounds, different cultures coming to faith, being established in church, and the church has been growing.

For those of us who've been around, it's been exciting. It's been encouraging. It's been a good way, I think, for us to start the first few months of this year to remind ourselves of who our God is.

But as we come to an end, I guess there's a temptation to think, well, that was then. This is now. That was Paul. That was Paul the apostle. That's not me. There can be that temptation to think, well, those are wonderful stories, but they're relegated to the pages of history.

Do you know one of the good news things that comes through the book of Acts is the reminder time and again that this is not all on Paul. It's Jesus who is building his church.

It's God's power that we see demonstrated through Paul and through others in the Christian community. And it's the same spirit that's at work in Paul that is ours as a church.

[7 : 21] And so I want us to leave Paul's missionary journeys taking heart that this is our God, the God who builds his church. But here we are.

Last week we were in Ephesus 9, chapter 19. We see Paul establishing the church. We saw a riot. And now here we find a return to meet with the elders of Ephesus where Paul both reviews what he's done and he also looks forward.

There's one more chance for us to draw some principles for ourselves from Paul's missionary journeys. So we've got a sermon with five points this evening, which sounds fairly intimidating, but I'll draw your attention to the story of Eutychus.

Paul says it's okay to preach till midnight. So let's just bed ourselves in and let's get ready to hear some of these principles from Paul. The first principle, mission, God's mission requires humble service.

Look with me again at verse 18. The elders of Ephesus are summoned to meet with Paul. And when they arrived, he said to them, you know how I lived. The whole time I was with you from the first day I came into the province of Asia, I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews.

[8 : 46] His attitude, his pattern from the beginning for the two and a half years that he was with them and through his mission was to serve with humility. He endured suffering. He endured opposition as he served among them.

He tells them in verse 33 to verse 35 that he took no pay in all the time that he was with them. He didn't want anyone to be able to speak badly of him and say, oh, this guy, Paul, he's just preaching

to make a name for himself and to get rich and famous.

Rather, he worked and in so doing provided an example of serving the weak and the poor with how he used his resources. And when we look across these chapters of Acts, we discover here is Paul who serves the church.

Here is Paul who serves the community. Sometimes that's through making tents and making tents well to the glory of God. Sometimes it's teaching. Sometimes it's evangelism.

But the question for us is this. What's the key to this humble service? How is he able to keep going serving the church while he faces so much threat and opposition? Notice what he says in verse 19. [9 : 54] I serve the Lord. As he served the church, as he served the city, as he served people, he was conscious that he was serving Jesus. That here he is loving others, but at the same time he's pursuing the glory of Jesus in all aspects of his mission.

And that example of Jesus, the humble servant, enables him to humbly serve. One of the things that I get to do as a representative of presbytery is I get to interview potential ministry candidates. And somebody handed this piece of information on to me or this piece of advice when you're looking at potential leaders in any church context. Do they pass the chair stacking test?

Very important test. Is somebody willing to show up early, to get stuck in, willing to stay late and to pack up? I worked in a co-op supermarket in Sky for about seven years.

Most of the time I was on the day shift, but I spent one summer on the night shift. Very different world when you're locked in for seven or eight hours at night. Still serving the public during that time, but my service was unseen and unnoticed.

[11 : 07] As Christians, maybe a lot of the service we do is the equivalent of night shift ministry. We're doing stuff that isn't necessarily upfront public notice.

So the question for us is, do I serve others for the glory of God even when no one else is watching?

We're called, like Paul, to love our family, our neighbors, our community for the sake of Jesus.

And so as we reflect, would we pass the chair stacking test as we think about humble service?

What we see of Paul is that he lived as an imitator of Jesus.

Jesus, the one who humbled himself, left the glory of heaven to come down to live among us, ultimately to humble himself, to suffer and die for us, taking our place, bearing our sin and our shame.

For the sake of gospel mission, do we embody that kind of humble service ourselves? So that's the first principle. Mission requires humble service.

[12 : 14] The next thing we learn from Paul is that mission requires teaching. Now we saw last week in Acts chapter 19 when Paul arrived in Ephesus, he did his usual thing. He began in the synagogue, teaching the Jews that the Messiah they were waiting for had come, and his name was Jesus. He spent three months in the synagogue before they drove him out, and then he spent two years teaching in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

And what we discover as Paul addresses the Ephesian elders is that as he taught them during that time, he gave them depth and he gave them breath.

You look at verse 20. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you. Verse 27. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

Paul knows this about this young church. They need to know the Bible. They need to have confidence of God's truth. They need to understand and appreciate the gospel and how it's the center of the Christian life.

So he doesn't teach superficially. He is aiming for maturity. He is laying a foundation. He's providing them essential truth that they can then pass on to others.

[13 : 34] And what we see too is a quote from John Stott was that Paul was thorough. He shared all possible truth with all possible people in all possible ways.

We see that in verse 20. He shared all possible truth. He didn't hesitate to teach anything that would be helpful. We see he does it with all possible people.

He's declaring it to both Jews and Greeks. And he's doing it in all possible ways. He's doing it publicly. He's doing it privately. Sometimes he's preaching. Other times he's debating. Sometimes he's lecturing.

Other times he's having in-depth conversations. Paul was a teacher. He knew that people needed the truth about God if they were to be saved and if they were to grow in holiness.

It takes us to that wonderful story of Eutychus. Paul knows when he goes to Troas, he's got one night and a bit with these people.

[14 : 30] So what does he do? He teaches. He teaches till midnight. Poor Eutychus is struggling, understandably perhaps. He falls asleep and he dies.

Three story drop. He's dead. What happens, Paul pauses just long enough to raise him from the dead, to share the Lord's Supper with the church, and then to get going again for perhaps another five or six hours.

God's truth matters. It's not that Paul is long-winded and he likes the sound of his own voice. He understood that truth matters in a church.

There was a special focus in Paul's ministry. Verse 24, he said his task, end of verse 24, his task was testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

What did he declare in verse 21? He declared to Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

[15 : 36] He's testifying about the gospel of God's grace, God's free and loving gift of salvation made available through the finished work of the Lord Jesus.

So he spent a lot of time teaching from the Old Testament to show that Jesus is the promised one, that Jesus fulfills all those rich promises that we find in the Bible.

So whether we're thinking about the promise made at the time when Adam and Eve fell into sin, that one would come and he would crush the head of the serpent, Paul would say, this one is Jesus.

He has come and he has gone to the cross to defeat the power of Satan and sin and death for his people. He would have drawn their attention to the promise made to Abraham, one of your descendants will bring blessing to the nation.

Jesus is that blessing. He would have looked at David, the great king, the one who hopes were centered on that one from his family would be the redeemer, the great king.

[16 : 43] That God promised. And again, see, that's Jesus. The one who has now taken the throne of heaven and rules and reigns forever. That Paul was demonstrating to the people that Jesus has come as a gift of God's grace, as the only way to be saved.

And because of that, people needed to repent of sin, to change their allegiance to allegiance and loyalty to God, to doing battle against sin, to having faith in Jesus alone, depending on him to save them from sin, and depending on him so that we might have a just verdict, a righteous verdict when we stand before God.

And so Paul is a teacher, and as a teacher, he focuses attention on Jesus as God's promise and the gospel of God's grace.

And he wants them to become mature. Our youngest nephew, who's now maybe three or four months old, he started on solids this week. Too much celebration from his parents.

Life gets much easier when babies are on solids. But also, I guess it's a sign, here is a child who's growing healthy, who's growing up. Something to celebrate.

[18 : 13] In our own lives, are we growing spiritually? Are we receiving from God in his word?

What is the place of the Bible in our day-to-day life and Christian experience? Are we growing in maturity?

And bearing in mind the fact that Paul was a teacher, and recognizing that we're not Paul the Apostle, but understanding that we are messengers, are we talking to others about Jesus, about how he's central to our hope?

Are we looking for ways to share our story to point others to Jesus as Lord? Because mission requires teaching. We have a heart to play in that.

The next principle that we see is that mission requires devotion to Jesus. So verses 22 to 24 are significant.

[19 : 16] Paul is looking ahead, led by the Spirit, to consider his future prospects. And what it seems from a human point of view is that his future looks fairly bleak. Verse 23, I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

But for him, he doesn't seem too concerned about that. His only concern seems to be about being faithful to the Lord Jesus. Verse 24, he says, Amazing word.

He wants every day to be on this race of faith, to be living in faith and obedience, anticipating that prize of eternal salvation with Christ that's laid up in heaven for him.

That's his goal. That's what drives him day by day. And he wants to complete the task that he's been given. He's called as an apostle to bring the good news of God's salvation through Jesus to the Gentile world.

That's his unique calling. And he wants to give himself totally, wholeheartedly to that task. We see Paul willing to be an instrument in the Redeemer's hand.

[20 : 46] He wants to live his life directing others towards God's grace and love demonstrated in the sending of Jesus, his son, to be the savior of the world.

This is the same Paul who when he was writing to the Philippians said, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. When we look at his example, we understand that those are not just nice sounding words.

He absolutely meant it. He was devoted to Jesus as Lord. I find it interesting sometimes to read the stories of the training regimes of some of Britain's top athletes, whether that's long distance runners or whether that's boxers.

It's really fascinating to listen to their sacrifice. Time away from family, maybe months at a time, altitude training, long hours, enduring agony, and why?

For the glory of an Olympic medal. For the prospect of winning or retaining a world championship. And they will go through anything, it seems, in order to win that prize.

[21 : 58] Now, by contrast, a couple of weeks ago, my friend sent me a message saying, hey, the Sky Half Marathon is on this June.

I hear it sounds like a nice race. Would you like to join me? It took me maybe five seconds to consider the cost and say, absolutely not. I was not willing to count that particular cost.

I'm not even sure that I could have done it anyway. But here's the question for us. When it comes to following Jesus, when it comes to serving Jesus, which are we?

Are we the willing to do anything or are we the couch potato person? Paul's example, the desire of God for us, is that we would be wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus.

And that would be reflected in our priorities and our values and how we live and how we serve. Am I willing, are you willing to suffer in mission for Jesus' sake and in response to God's grace to what?

[23 : 06] To the suffering of Jesus for us. And I was reminded of the words of the missionary Jim Elliott who gave his life seeking to bring the gospel to tribespeople.

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. Mission requires devotion to the Lord Jesus.

And we also see from Paul's life and mission that mission requires the local church. All the way through the book of Acts, we discover that Paul worked quickly to establish churches and to establish elders within those churches.

So here, having spent two and a half years in Ephesus, there's clearly a church has been planted, elders have been appointed, and now he calls these elders to speak with him.

Paul was leaving, but they would remain. So what is his message to the elders and to them as the local church?

[24 : 14] And his message is this, keep watch, be on guard. three different aspects to that. First of all, at the beginning of verse 28, he says, keep watch over yourselves.

To the church leadership in particular, he's saying, you need personal holiness. You need to be devoted to the truth. You need to be sharing and living out the gospel in your own experience. Reminded me of the words of Robert Murray McShane where he said, my people's greatest need is my personal holiness. So they're called to keep watch over themselves. They're also called to keep watch over the church.

Continuing in verse 28, keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood.

Now, Paul says something amazing about the church there. He's saying to the leaders, remember you're shepherds but ultimately you're under shepherds. What does he say about the church? He says, the Holy Spirit has appointed them as overseers.

[25 : 25] The church doesn't belong to them. It belongs to God, the Father and the church has been bought by the blood of Jesus Christ. This is a flock with infinite value.

This is a flock who ultimately are being shepherded by Father, Son and Spirit. The local church matters to God and the local church matters in mission.

Therefore, it's important that they also keep watch and guard against false teaching and false teachers. Verse 29, I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard. Internal dangers, external dangers.

And they're called to defend the truth, to protect the sheep from lies and against spiritual attack. The local church matters.

[26 : 32] Eldership in a local church matters. Let me encourage you to pray for your elders. They are shepherds looking to feed you from God's word, looking to protect you by presenting gospel truth.

They are a gift of God for the church in order to guide and strengthen and help grow. So pray for your elders.

But remember too that mission is not a solo project. Mission is something that the church does. I love the list of verse 4, chapter 20, verse 4, apart from the fact that the names are not that straightforward.

What we see, and we see this so often, when Paul is on mission, he doesn't go by himself. He has others who he's training up to work alongside him.

He has others to support him, people with different gifts, but they're all engaged on mission together. Paul was careful to establish local churches because they were outposts from which the good news could then spread in communities and cities and regions.

[27 : 51] So the local church matters for God's mission. And so we need to pray that for us as a local church and for the local churches that you belong to if you're visiting, that those churches would be defended and guarded in the truth against lies and against opposition and spiritual attack.

And just to think a little bit more about the place of the church and mission, remember the words of Jesus. He said it to his disciples by extension to us. He said, they will know you are Christians by your love.

Now he doesn't mean as an individual goes out and loves others. There he means they will know you are Christians by the way that you have love one with another by your shared love.

And so one of the things that we need to think through is how can you and I, how can we as a local church, how can we make that love more visible to the people who don't come into church, to the people who we live with, to the people who are around about us and who we work with.

Our shared love is part of our mission. So mission requires the local church. And the last principle, a hugely important principle, is that mission requires God's grace.

[29 : 15] In verse 25, Paul says, now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Paul would never see the church that he planted ever again.

How can he be okay with that? How can he not be stressed out wondering, how is this church going to do without me? Verse 32 is the answer.

Here's what he says to the Ephesian elders, now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

God's grace is the key. God's grace begins the church. God's grace will sustain the church. So what Paul does, knowing he's never going to see them again, is he commits this church to God, their true shepherd, trusting, again to quote from Philippians, that he who began a good work in you would carry it on to completion.

Paul knows the power of God's grace. He knows that it's grace that saves a person. He knows that it's grace at work in a person's life that sanctifies, makes clean, makes more like Jesus a person.

[30 : 38] And he knows that it's grace that secures a person's final inheritance. In other words, he knows that grace is the A to Z of Christian life and so he commits the church to the God of grace and to his word.

So his whole mission rested on this truck. This is God's work. Jesus is the one who will continue to build his church. Even if I'm not here, I can trust that God will continue what he has begun.

That's not an easy thing. Before being here, I spent four years in international student ministry and that was one of the really difficult things. You spend maybe a year with people, introducing them to Christianity, teaching them the gospel, seeing some of them respond in faith, but then you send them home.

And a lot of the times, not having a clue how things would go with them, it's really hard to commit people to God's care. We want to see how they're getting on, but that's not always the case. And Paul's lesson to this church is I might go, but God is still with you and that's what matters. God's word of grace belongs to you and that's what's going to sustain you.

[31 : 56] He trusted that implicitly. Small picture of that. Toddlers on a Friday happens in that hall.

And it's nice to see there's certain patterns and traditions that go along with the toddlers. So come five to eleven, it's time to pack up, tables and chairs go away, the toys go away, and all the kids help with that.

The thing that they've started to do that's new is they've started to help. We turn the sofas around so that people can play with their kids, not to sit on the floor. So the kids, come the end of the time, have taken to helping to lift the sofa.

Now if you've ever tried to lift, they're fairly hefty, those sofas. So you can see them, they're working and being involved in this project, but here's the good news, success in sofa lifting is not down to them.

They're playing their part, but they are not ultimately the source of strength. And you know, that's the comfort for us in mission. It's God's mission, it's God's strength, it's God's grace, it's not on us.

[33 : 06] God is pleased to use us and that's wonderful, and we should be encouraged by that, but ultimately it relies on his grace and power. not our ability. So we leave Paul's missionary journeys remembering that this same God that built his church then is the same God who continues to build his church now, and there's an invitation for all of us to do our part to get on board.

together. So let's talk to each