

Passing the baton

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[0 : 00] Amen. Okay, if I was going to give this sermon a title, I could probably have come up with a better one than this if I'd really thought about it, but I would use the title Passing the Baton.

You know, in a relay race, when the baton holder gets to the end of his run, he passes the baton on to the next one. And in some ways, that's kind of what is happening with the Apostle Paul.

As you know, he's in Ephesus, but previously he had been in Greece, in Corinth, and it was in Corinth that he apparently wrote to the church at Rome.

And when he wrote to the church at Rome, the book of Romans, he says in that letter that he longs to visit them so that he can bless them, but also so that they can support him as he desires to go on to the farthest reaches of the West, Spain, at the time.

And so that was his plan. He was in Ephesus. He was in Corinth. He planned to go to, at some point, to Rome and from there on to Spain. But he went back to Ephesus, Turkey. He'd been there previously because he'd planned the church, and he was there to spend some more time with them.

[1 : 26] And as we read, from Ephesus, he didn't go to Rome. He went down to Jerusalem. And he knew that that was going to be bad news for him. It was going to be a difficult time.

And indeed it was. In Jerusalem, he was arrested, and he was then taken to the very place where he wanted to go, Rome. And it wasn't the way that he planned to go, but that's what happened. So he ended up in Rome.

And the book of Acts closes out with him under house arrest in Rome. Now we are told by Clement, who was one of the early church fathers, that actually Paul was released from imprisonment in Rome.

And that's very feasible because the Roman authorities weren't convinced by the Jewish allegations. And that according to Clement, he went to the farthest reaches of the West, which would almost certainly be Spain.

So maybe he made it there. But his plans worked out, not according to his plans, but according to God's plans. And that involved hardship. But here's the thing. As Paul was about to go down to Jerusalem and leave the church at Corinth, a church that he had planted and established, this was a big deal for Paul because he knew he wouldn't see them again.

[2 : 40] Now he has invested so much of himself. It comes out in the passage we just read. He invested so much of himself in this church, and now he's got to go and leave them, and he's never going to see them again.

And so really, he calls the leaders of the church to himself, and it's kind of like he throws the whole kitchen sink at them. He gives them everything they've got to encourage them to work out the investment that he's put into that church into the future.

You know, Paul, at the time, the church was still very young and very, very vulnerable and very fragile. And so Paul was probably feeling a lot of anxiety for the church.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 and verse 28, this is what Paul lists all the various hardships that he's gone through for the sake of the gospel.

And at the end of it, he writes, And besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

[3 : 46] Or some translations say the anxiety of all the churches. Paul was concerned about the churches. And that concern must have been acute as he left this church that meant so much to him, knowing he'd never see them again.

Are they going to stay true to the gospel? Well, we know, don't we, that the church since then has spread. It's a global thing. Now, Paul didn't know that at the time.

He believed it by faith. So Paul is really passing on the baton. And it's helpful for us to get a sense of what it was like for Paul.

We have got among us here today, Daniel and Becky, haven't we? I don't know where they are. They're here somewhere. Where are they? Over that way, yeah, yeah. Well, Becky at least. We didn't know, oh, there's Daniel. We didn't know if they were going to be here, did we? And hopefully they'll be here at least till the end of the service. But Becky's going to be having a baby. [4 : 55] And at some point, there's going to be a first time when Becky and Daniel leave that baby with someone to look after. They're going to go out for an evening or they'll do something.

There's going to be a first time when they do that. And anyone that's got children will know that's quite an anxious time, isn't it? Leaving your baby with someone. And when you do that, you kind of give all sorts of instructions and you take all sorts of precautions to make sure that they know everything that they need to know.

That they can contact you if anything, you know, if they need to or whatever. And there's a certain anxiety that comes with that. And I guess it was something like that multiplied many times for the Apostle Paul.

The church was kind of like his baby. He loved it. The church, like a newborn baby, it was something that he loved and was precious, really precious.

And that was vulnerable. I wonder how do you see the church? Do you see the church as something to really be loved, that you do really love, that's precious and vulnerable?

[6 : 04] Because all those things are true about the church. So, there's a degree of anxiety for the Apostle Paul.

And in trying to encourage the leaders of the church to keep on the work that Paul has been doing. And Paul knows how hard it is. You know, he had been previously chased out of Ephesus. They tried to kill him. And have him killed. Paul knew the cost involved in establishing a church and in ministering to a church.

And he wanted the leaders to be equipped and to be prepared and ready to continue this really tough work at times.

And in doing that, Paul shares with them what they know he has done.

[7 : 05] In other words, he reminds them of the example that he has set. So, verses 18 to 21.

Verses 8, chapter 20, verses 18 to 21. Paul writes, Verse 26 and 27.

And he again appeals to the testimony of his example. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent. They know this. Of the blood of any of you.

For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. And then verses 33 to 35.

I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You know yourselves. These hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.

[8 : 57] In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work, we must help the weak. Remembering the words of the Lord Jesus himself. It is more blessed to give than to receive.

So, Paul has set an example for them. And he says to them, You know. And he's writing to the people that he knows. Now, here's the thing. We could read this 2,000 years later and think, Well, that was what Paul was saying to the elders then.

That's not really relevant for me. That's for the elders then. Or we might say, Well, maybe it's for the elders here in this church. And it is. But, you know, although Paul said those words to those elders, 2,000 years ago, it's been recorded in God's word for all of us.

This is for us all. So, the example that Paul has set is an example for the elders, but for all of us. Paul has shown that his top priority has been the gospel.

He has served and worked to advance the gospel in their lives and in the lives of those that don't yet know him. And he's done it at cost.

[10 : 15] And he's done it with love. And he's done it with humility and with compassion. He says, That was a dangerous thing to do then.

But he never hesitated. And so, brothers and sisters, Paul, by his example, is showing us what it takes for a church to be healthy and strong and grow.

It means we mustn't hesitate in the ministry of the gospel. But it's a ministry of love and humility towards one another.

He's innocent of their blood, he says, because he's preached the gospel to everyone he can. I wonder if there are people that you know in your networks that haven't yet heard the gospel.

They've not heard it. They know you and you have the gospel. The only thing that can save them from their sin.

[11 : 22] There's a challenge there, isn't it? Paul says, I'm innocent of the blood of all of you. There was no one outstanding for him. Isn't that a challenge?

No one. I thought, wow. And I read that. I thought, man, that's a challenge for me. But the real challenge is this. It says he didn't hesitate. And maybe we just need to get on with it.

Just do it. Just do it. Those people that you think about, I'm going to do it, Lord. Give me your courage and just do it. And also he says, doesn't he, those last verses I read, I haven't coveted anything that, you know, anyone else's stuff.

You know, he's not kind of looking around the church or looking at other people and spending his time wishing he had things that other people have got. Isn't that a temptation? You know, with all the advertising we get, we can get caught up with all of that.

He's just not been interested. He's had a single mind. There's something far more important. He's not coveted. Rather, he's got on with the work.

[12 : 28] He's not been in the ministry either to make money out of that. In fact, he's worked to support his own ministry and to support others and even the weak.

You know, the significant thing about the weak is they're the ones that can't pay you back. And he's done it for them. And so he set an example. This is the kind of person Paul was.

Imagine a church just full of people like this. What a glorious church that would be. And I'm sure we're on the journey to that and encourage us in doing that.

So Paul has set an example for us and he refers to it in this passage. But the second thing is we see Paul's example. We also see Paul's warning.

Verse 29 and 30. I know, so Paul's about to leave.

[13 : 29] And you imagine how this makes it harder for him. I know that after I leave, and remember, this is Paul's baby. Savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

Now we know why he feels concerned and anxious. Even from among your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

Brothers and sisters, remember this is Paul speaking to the elders then. It's been recorded for all of us. God wants us all to be aware and to not be naive that there will be those who want to come into the church and distort the word of God.

See, they'd have to distort it if it's a sound church and they want to draw people off after themselves. They'd have to distort it in some way because otherwise they'd just be lining up with everything you're hearing.

But they distort the word to draw off people after themselves. Paul describes them as savage wolves who will not spare the flock. They don't care.

[14 : 46] They'll have anyone as long as people will follow them. That's what they're interested in. And Paul is warning the church. You know, wolves among sheep, it's a dangerous combination, isn't it?

Really? It's a dangerous combination. And they're going to come in, Paul says, from outside. But he also says, even from your own number.

However, that should send a bit of a chill up our spines. I'll tell you why this is so serious. Because these wolves, they may not know that they're wolves.

They may not be aware of it. That's a scary thing. And they probably, even if they are aware of it, they probably didn't start off thinking, I'm going to be a wolf in the church.

They just wanted to be the center of attention. They wanted people to follow themselves. They would see their leaders perhaps and think, I can do a better job.

[15 : 57] Or, you know, everyone's following them. I want my church or I want my platform. I want people to come to me. It's a dangerous thing. Paul says these are savage wolves.

And so we need to, all of us, check our own hearts. Do you find yourself perhaps grumbling with others in the church about the leaders?

Do you find yourself perhaps sharing your slightly unique angle on what's being preached that's a bit different? Trying to persuade others and enjoying the fact that they're buying in to what you're teaching?

It's a dangerous, dangerous thing. Even from among ourselves, from among their own number. May it not be happening in the church, in this place.

But if it is, you need to repent. But Paul says, doesn't he, that they're also coming from outside. And that's a bit easier to stomach.

[17:05] At least they're not one of us kind of thing. In the time of the apostles, there would be itinerant preachers. And they would go from church to church. And often they'd have letters of commendation from their last church.

But not all. Some would try to get into the church to spread their gangrene. And it was the job of the elders to keep them out.

To guard the gate. We need to support our leaders in doing that. But do you know, that is much harder now. Because it's not just wolves trying to get into the church.

But you open your computer. And you Google. And there are a million wolves out there. Millions of them. And some of us may be tuning into people.

Who really are about building their following. Just like these. Drawing off people to themselves. I want to encourage you to check with your leaders.

[18:12] If you're listening to people online. Check with your leaders. How can your leaders do their job if you don't? That's what the elders are for.

That's their job. And yours is to support them. And so we do that. By checking with them. It's probably a good idea for the elders. To tell the church.

That if you're going to do that. Here's some good sites. To recommend some things. So Paul warns. And we shouldn't be surprised. When it happens.

It's a sad thing. But it happens. So we see Paul's example. We see his warning. We see his instruction. Verses 28 to 31 again. Be shepherds of the church of God.

Which he bought with his own blood. As we just read a moment ago. I know that after I leave.

Savage wolves will come in among you. And will not spare the flock. Even from among your own number.

[19:17] Men will arise. And distort the truth. In order to draw away disciples after them. So. So be shepherds of the flock. And here's the next one. Be on your guard. Remember.

That for three years. I never stopped warning. Each of you. Night and day. With tears. Keep watch. Be shepherds.

Be on your guard. And so. All of us need to be doing that. The elders need to be doing that. We need to be looking out for one another.

Keeping watch. I said a moment ago. If you find yourself speaking to other people in the church. Trying to bring them into your way of thinking. You know.

You need to repent. But if someone speaks to you. And they're trying to persuade you of certain things. Or if you know that's happening in the church.

[20:17] You do need to tell the elders. You need to address that. Paul says. Keep watch. Be wise. Churches go off the rails. Even here in Brighton.

Churches that were once sound. Are no longer sound. You see. There started to be some. Less than sound teaching. And no one did anything about it. Nobody did anything about it.

It's up to the church. To take responsibility there. All of us. Elders first. But also the church. And we're to be shepherds.

Not wolves. What a contrast. Again isn't it? Such a difference. Jesus the good shepherd. We're to be something like him. And he was gentle to the flock.

He loved the flock. When one goes astray. What does it say? He leaves the 99. And goes after the one that's gone astray. This is what we're meant to be like.

[21:20] And when Jesus goes after the one that's gone astray. What does that actually mean? Well he does that through his body. Right? That's you and me. When we go. When someone's drifting off.

And we go and call them back. And urge them to come back. This is the Lord. reaching out. Going after the ones that have gone astray. It's you and me. This is how he does it. Through his body.

The church. We're to be shepherds. To encourage. Edify. Build up. Nurture. Nourish. Love. One another. So Paul's example.

His instruction. Sorry. His warning. His instruction. And then we're going to think about the cost. Of mission. Verse 38.

What grieved them most. Was his statement. That they would never see his face again. Then. They accompanied him. To the ship. Mission.

[22 : 21] Always means. Somewhere along the line. Something that we don't like. Which is. Loss. There's a loss. Involved in mission. Mission. For them.

It meant. There was a sense. Which they really were. Losing someone. They really loved. And valued. But it. There was. You know. Someone they valued. But it was for the sake of something. Even more valuable. Which is the mission. The gospel mission. And for Paul. His mission. Endeavor. Meant the cost. Of leaving behind.

That which he really valued. And in some ways. All of us. Need to be ready. And prepared for that. You see. I guess. You know.

You come to this church. Because you love it. You value this church. I hope. But when we really value the church. Here's what we can do.

[23 : 16] We can think. I don't want it to change. You know. Because we love it. And I understand that. And that's not a bad thing. That's a sign that we do love the church.

So it's good if you don't want it to change. But. There's something that we want. Even more than that. That is lost people.

Being one. Into the church. And if that happens. And for that to happen. All of us. Have to let go. Of the church that we love.

Because it's going to change. Many of you know this. As I look out. I can see over the years. This is a very different church. The church that was. Is gone. And there's a cost.

And a loss. But that's the price we pay. In terms of your relationships. There are people that you really love. That you connect with. But for the church to grow.

[24 : 11] You have to be prepared to say to one another. As much as I love spending my time with you. There are others that we need to bring in. And there's a loss.

And a cost. To the mission. That we see here. And that we ourselves would experience. To be ready for that. Lord I'll pay that price.

And then lastly. Why bother? Well let's just go back to verse 28 again. Why bother? With you know. Keeping an eye out.

You know. We've seen there's a cost to mission. Why bother? With any of it. Verse 28. Be shepherds of the church of God.

Which he bought. With his own blood. Why bother? Why bother? Because the church.

[25 : 13] And the gospel. And the mission. Are so. So valuable. Yeah. So valuable. I said it's like. For Paul it was like his baby. Most of us.

You know. If we have a baby. We're going to be really. Careful with that. The church is so valuable. To the Lord. To the Lord.

That all the gold. And all the silver. And all the diamonds. And all the precious stones. In all the world. Amassed together. Weren't enough.

To buy. A single soul. Wasn't enough. Too precious. The only thing. That was precious. Enough.

To pay. For the church. To pay. For lost people. Was his. Blood. That's the price. He paid.

[26 : 08] For this church. Isn't this church. Worth it. If it's worth it. For him. Isn't it worth it. For you. And for me. For me. For me. Let's.

Let's pray. Lord. We. Thank you. For your word. And as we've. Closed on that. Thought. That you. Paid. With your. Blood.

That's how. Far. You was. Prepared. To go. It's. Doubtful. That any of us. Are going to have to pay. That price. But we do know.

That. Paul writes. To the Philippians. And says. I fill up. In my body. The sufferings. Of Christ. That though. Jesus. Has paid it all.

For our salvation. There's still yet. More. Cost. To be paid. By his body. For the church. And I pray.

[27 : 04] Lord. That we. Every one of us. All of us. Would value. The church. Forgive us. Where. We've just seen. There's something to go to.

On a Sunday. To dip in. And dip out of them. We've treated it. Like a consumable. Forgive us. Lord. For reducing the church. To something so cheap.

Help us. Lord. To value. That. Which you paid for. With your blood. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.