

The farewell tour

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Date: 06 August 2017

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[0 : 00] Actually, I'm going to start by reading from Proverbs. It's up on the screen there, so you don't need to find it. So Proverbs chapter 4, verses 3 to 6 reads the following.

When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender, and an only child, or perhaps you can translate it as the darling of my mother, he, that's my father, taught me and said, lay hold of my words with all your heart.

Keep my commands and you will live. Get wisdom. Get understanding. Do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom and she will protect you. Love her and she will watch over you.

There is, I guess, a sort of reminder that it is the mother who watches over the child, but it is wisdom that will watch over the child as the child gets older.

So what's this got to do with Acts 20? Well, you could make a loose paraphrase of Acts 20, 27, would be something like this. I have been careful to tell you everything you need to know about God.

[1 : 25] That seems a remarkable claim, actually, doesn't it, when you think of it, but that's pretty much what he says. Obviously, he can't tell us everything there is to know about God, but he has told us everything we need to know in order to find God and find our way to God.

So Paul has faced opposition from the Jews. He's faced derision from the Athenians. He's faced opposition and a riot in Ephesus.

And he's apparently realized that his missionary activities are really reaching an end. He's got to go to Rome eventually, but he's going via Jerusalem. This passage tells us three times in verse 16, 22, and 23 that he's heading for Jerusalem.

And indeed, he's in a hurry to get there. So he's going to the political center of the world by way of the religious center of the world, one might say. And he expects to be arrested, verse 23.

But actually, he doesn't think that's going to make a lot of difference, because he's already being compelled by the Spirit, verse 22, to go to Jerusalem.

[2 : 41] So this is his final tour, sometimes described as Paul's third missionary journey, but in a sense that's slightly inaccurate, because his purpose here doesn't seem to be so much preaching the gospel in new places, but rather consolidation.

Now, it's true that other passages of Scripture suggest there were other things that happened during this trip as well. They seem to have taken a collection for the church in Jerusalem. And Paul is revisiting the churches he has planted.

But that's what Luke focuses on, the fact that he is revisiting these churches to encourage them. I haven't done a map, but the geography is fairly simple.

From Ephesus, he heads anticlockwise, first of all, around the Aegean Sea, into Macedonia, and then down south into Greece.

He plans to sail directly back to Syria, which, of course, is not that far from Jerusalem, but for some reason, it's not explained how, a Jewish plot foils that plan. Verse 3.

[3 : 50] And so, instead, most of the team decide to select an overland route. So, they return back the way they've come, basically, clockwise, round the Aegean, while some of them, including apparently Luke himself, cross the northern part of the Aegean by ship, from Philippi to Troas, which is about the most northern place you can sensibly make a sea crossing in the Aegean Sea.

And we see that by this time, it's no longer a sort of two-man outfit, isn't it? It's not Paul and Barnabas anymore. It's not just Paul and Silas.

It's a large team. And there are all sorts of logistical problems of getting everything and everyone in the right place at the right time.

Luke doesn't say a lot about logistics, but he does touch on it a bit here, because there's a lot of people moving about here. And getting everywhere where they're expected and in the right place and at the right time, as he says, is a bit of a problem.

2 Corinthians 2.13, for instance, tells us that Titus was not in Troas where Paul expected to find him. And Luke does list the team members here, or many of them, and you'll notice that it's made up of people from a variety of places that Paul had preached.

[5 : 15] A notable inclusion is Timothy, whom Paul seemed to be grooming as his successor. Notice also that the names, as Mark pointed out to us, are Latin or Greek, rather than Hebrew.

These are mostly Hellenic Jews or even Gentiles. It's not entirely sure which. And the whole team reassembles at Troas, ancient Troy.

And then they head on south, mostly by ship from port to port. So perhaps because weariness is catching up to an aging Paul, so he decides to travel by ship rather than overland.

Now again, 2 Corinthians 2.12 suggests that he didn't pass up an opportunity for evangelism when it presented itself, but said it's clear that Paul's primary purpose in this final circuit is to encourage the churches.

And this is certainly what Luke focuses on in his account here. Paul is aware that his time with the young churches is limited.

[6 : 21] It says that in verse 2, and then again at the end, of course, he tells the Ephesian elders that he's never going to see them again. He's aware that his time is limited.

And just as Jesus left Peter to guard the flock, so Paul is leaving his converts in other hands. He's expecting them to be attacked. He says this specifically in verses 29 and 30.

He's expecting opposition and persecution from outside, and he's expecting heresy and schism from within. So what's Paul's method to protect his flock against the wolves that are sought to attack it?

Luke's quite clear, isn't he here? Luke's priority is many words. Verse 9. Perhaps even Luke thought that Paul's sermons were a bit long, but Eutychus went to sleep by the late hour and burning lamps, and he becomes a kind of involuntary parable.

The sermon in it sends him to sleep and he falls. He's revived by Paul's words so that the people are comforted. The Greek word for comforted here is the same as the word for encouragement in verse 2.

[7 : 38] Paul is absolutely certain that the best method to protect God's people is understanding. An understanding of God's will and purpose, which is as complete as human language can possibly make it.

He says this twice in this passage in verse 20 and in verse 27. He says essentially the same thing. And yet the strange thing is that Luke gives us almost nothing of the actual content of these sermons, even though he makes it quite clear that certainly in Troas he was actually there. And yet, if you want to know the content of these sermons, you have to look elsewhere, perhaps in Paul's letters. So Luke focuses here not on the what so much as on the where and on the how, and perhaps mostly importantly of all, the why.

Because actually, all Luke really tells us of Paul's message can be summed up in a single sentence.

Verse 21. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. Well, to say that takes a matter of a few seconds.

[8 : 58] And yet, Paul took all night saying it and hadn't finished. It's clear from the rest of the passage that this is not some trite formula, some overly simplistic gospel tract.

This apparently simple message actually involves a whole world of spiritual wisdom if it's to be properly understood, lived out and passed on. In fact, I think the suggestion is that you could stay up all night for a month and you still wouldn't have said enough.

Paul's way of defending the flock against the wolves is many words. But if Luke doesn't say much about the content, he says quite a lot about the method.

And it's worth looking at this, actually, and if we just follow some of the words through, more or less in the order they are in the text, we can get quite a lot of insight into Paul's method.

So, first of all, he starts in verse 1 by saluting the disciples. It can be translated embracing them. But I think the NIV just rather blandly says he encouraged them and said goodbye.

[10:21] But it's a more personal word than that. It can mean to embrace them. It can mean, as I say, actually to salute them in the sense of giving them a salutation, a greeting.

And certainly in verse 2, we read that he encouraged, he spoke many words of encouragement to the people. Paul's not setting out a sort of systematic theology.

He's not giving you some abstract philosophy of life. And yet he's certainly teaching doctrine and he's certainly telling them how to live. But this wisdom that he's giving them is meant to be practical. It's meant to be warm. It's meant to be encouraging. It's intended, in fact, to provide his hearers with spiritual nourishment so that they can become spiritually strong.

And we notice that his words are delivered with a passionate concern. The word tears appears twice in the New International Version of Acts. I can't tell you the Greek, but certainly in English, the word tears appears twice in Acts.

[11:33] And both times they're in Acts 20, in verses 19 and verse 31. Paul's message is delivered with tears, with passion, by putting his whole soul into it, as one might say.

So that's the style, as it were. What does he do? Well, Luke tells us that he stretches out words. That's one way of translating verse 7. You know I'm no Greek scholar, but I did look up some of the Greek words. And the words there are logos, the usual term for words.

But the word paratino, which means to stretch something out. So it means, you know, he went on at some length. It wasn't something he could cover very quickly.

It took some time to explain what he had to say. Verse 11, Luke tells us that he talks for a long while. And the words there are homileo, to sort of deliver a homily.

[12:51] And he can us, which can mean for a long while. Or it can actually mean long enough. It took him a long time to say what he had to say. And he's careful to leave nothing out.

Verse 20, he kept back nothing profitable. Anything he could think of that would help them. He was careful to say it.

And there's something to note here, that Christian wisdom cannot and must not be reduced to simplistic rules. That was the Pharisaic way. It just doesn't work like that.

Only a complete, rounded understanding of what God is doing and how the world reacts to that will suffice to protect the growing church and the dangers that surround it.

And this takes time and energy. There is a lot that needs to be said and done. And then Luke tells us that Paul has a variety of modes for saying it.

[14:00] Basically, he's in the business of teaching. Didasco, to teach. Verse 20, and he does it in public and he does it in private. Teaching is the basis, whether it's in large groups or in small groups.

But what kind of teaching? Well, what do we find? First of all, in verses 21 and 24, we find that Paul testifies. Diamaturomi is a long word, but it means to testify, to bear witness, to be a witness.

Paul speaks from personal experience. He's not just regurgitating a textbook as the sort of worst kind of lecturing is. He's speaking from experience. He's giving his own testimony.

And yet, on the other hand, it's not just some touchy-feely personal experience. We're told that Paul preaches, verse 25.

He declares or proclaims, verse 27. The message consists of facts. It's based on facts that must be grasped and appreciated and understood.

[15:13] It has content. It claims to be truth and must robustly stand up to those who think otherwise. Brothers and sisters, if you want to keep out Mr. Wolf, then it's no good building your house with sticks and straw or twigs, because he'll huff and he'll puff and he'll blow your house down.

You want to keep out Mr. Wolf, you've got to build solid with solid brick. You've got to have an edifice that will stand up when the attack comes. What else does Paul tell us?

Well, he tells us that he warns and he commends or perhaps commits, the NIV translates it, commits them to the word, puts those two together, verses 31 and 32.

And I think intentionally, because they kind of do go together, they're kind of opposite sides of the same coin. And it reminds us that the message requires not just an intellectual assent, but a personal response, a response of trust, a response of faith, a response to take the advice that you're given.

If you're planning a walk along the Seven Sisters Cliffs in East Sussex, I would warn you to stay away from the edge and I would commend you to stay on the path.

[16:43] That's the safe route. But understanding this in principle will not help you if you still insist on messing about near the danger zone. The warnings for a purpose, the commending, the committing to the path is for a purpose.

That's what will keep you safe, prevent you from going over the edge. And tragically, people do go over the edge of the Seven Sisters because they don't heed the warnings.

They mess about. You've seen photographs of it, haven't you? So those are some of the methods that Paul uses to teach. In summary then, Paul speaks.

That's what he always does when he goes to a new place. Did you notice that as we were going through Acts? First thing he does is he speaks. Yes, the message may well be accompanied by signs and pictures.

It will certainly be reinforced by works of mercy. But the first priority is to speak. The primary content is verbal.

[18:04] Why should that be? Well, I would suggest it's because that is precisely how God himself communicates. God speaks. Isaiah has a lot to say about that, doesn't he?

He says, well, there's all these idols and they've got mouths, but they don't say a lot. It is our God is the one who speaks. We can hardly overemphasize this point.

What's Paul's answer to ignorance of the gospel? What's Paul's answer to heresy? What's Paul's answer to failing, falling away or just failing to make any progress?

His answer is words. Words of encouragement. Words of warning. Words that promote understanding. The job of any minister of the gospel is summed up in that verse 27 to speak the whole will of God.

Not to hold back anything that might be profitable to the people. to speak not some dry lecture but rather to speak with passion and tears and to speak and to go on speaking for years if necessary and then I suppose if you finally went out of things to say, you could start again and say it all again because you'll have a new batch of people who are listening.

[19:25] And in this of course this is not something that Paul has made up and adopted in his sort of Greek education.

On the contrary Paul is merely following the lead of Jesus himself isn't he? He said, therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

We sang it didn't we last week with the children. The rain came down and the floods came up but the house on the rock stood firm. You want to keep the floods out?

You want to keep the rain out? Then build your house on God's word on Jesus' words. That's the rock on which the house is built. Here's a few more verses.

I couldn't put them all on the screen but let me read them to you. These are all words of Jesus. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.

[20:36] That's Matthew 10 14. Or the parable of the sower which again we were looking at recently. The one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it.

He produces a crop yielding 160 or 30 times what was sown. You want to be fruitful? Then hear the word and understand it.

If you've got a computer and a bit of mathematics you can work out what the night sky looked like 2,000 years ago when Jesus said those words.

And yet that will change because Jesus said heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away.

More regular more solid than rock more regular than the heavens is the word of God and the word that Jesus brings. And what is it that judges the world?

[21:50] John 12 48 says there is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words. that very word which I spoke will condemn him at that last day.

John 15 verse 3 you are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. John 17 verse 6 I have revealed to you those whom you gave me out of the world.

They were yours you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. John 17 7 sanctify them by the truth your word is truth.

And there are so many other examples I could spend all till midnight just listing them really. Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Now of course that isn't all that Paul did. He points out to us in verses 33 and 37. He works to help support the ministry.

[23 : 04] He works to help the weak. The quotation he makes from Jesus' own words suggests that he means practical help as well as words. And certainly he prays for them and he prays with them.

He breaks bread with them. He demonstrates their mutual love in verse 37. Verse 10 he does practical works of encouragement in bringing Eutychus back to life.

Verse 23 he gives up his own freedom and comfort for their benefit. But why does he do all this stuff? Well he tells us doesn't he in verse 32 all these things are done so that the word might have free course.

Because it is that which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. How are you going to make it to heaven?

I'm a great believer in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints but how does God bring his people to heaven? Well he does it the same way as he does everything else really by his word.

[24 : 18] So brothers and sisters let us resist any attempt to devalue that word. That is the way to sanctification. That's the way we achieve our inheritance.

It's through the word. But of course words can be ignored. They can have their meaning devalued. Words can be twisted by the unscrupulous.

They can be misdefined by the ignorant and made to mean something different. Verse 30 So how do we avoid all these traps?

Well we do it by having a rounded gospel. We do it by diligent study. By developing our understanding. That's why the Bible talks about wisdom.

Paul says to the mature we do impart wisdom. wisdom. Not the wisdom of this world it's true but wisdom nonetheless. And it is wisdom which in sense is just another word for the word which will protect us.

[25 : 32] Well I mentioned that one of the people in this trip was Timothy. Timothy. And it does indeed seem that Paul was particularly grooming Timothy as his successor.

And well we don't actually have as I say much information of the content of Paul's message in Acts 20. To just find that out we have to look at Paul's letters.

So let's look at what Paul himself said in one of his letters. His letter to Timothy. This is the second letter to Timothy. And what he said about the word.

I think that would be a good place for us to stop. What does he say? 2 Timothy 1 verse 13 says from this.

What you heard from me keep as the pattern of sound teaching the NIV translates it but the Greek actually says as the pattern of sound words.

[26 : 37] Pattern of sound words. Healthy words. That's what sound means really. Healthy. And pattern is a structure to it.

They're not random words. He may be talking about some particular creed. We're not certain but there's certainly a structure. A pattern a template.

But it isn't. Well it isn't of course as I say is a trite sort of rule. Rather it is an understanding. So what you've heard from me keep as the pattern of sound teaching with faith and love in Christ Jesus.

Words are not in competition to faith and love. the words are what bring about faith and love. If you keep the pattern of sound teaching and if it's really sound teaching then the result will be faith and love.

Then Paul goes on a bit later. He's talked about the elect. Those whom God is in the business of saving and how is Timothy to address them.

[27 : 53] How does Paul tell Timothy to address them? Well he says the following to Timothy 2 14 and 15. Keep reminding them of these things.

Don't just say it once. Keep reminding them. Warn them before God against quarreling about words. Words can be devalued and messed up and used to cause confusion rather than clarity. So don't quarrel about words because that's of no value. It only ruins those who listen. That has exactly the opposite effect to what Timothy's words are supposed to do. So what's Timothy to do instead of quarreling about words?

He's to do his best to present himself to God as one approved. one who has the stamp from the master craftsman, the workman who is on what's that website called Checker Trade who has the references to say yeah this craftsman knows his business.

He's to present himself to God as one approved a workman who does not need to be ashamed and what is the skill that he has been approved of? It is to correctly handle the word of truth.

[29 : 14] In other words to explain the word, to remind his people of the word correctly so that they understand it properly. We're not all to lean to our own understanding.

There is a public understanding in a sense and yet it must be our own understanding. Only our own understanding not something second hand from the preacher is going to protect you when the wolf arrives.

And then again Timothy is warned that things can easily go wrong. So in 2 Timothy 4 verse 3 Paul says the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine.

They won't put up with healthy words. They'll be more interested in the weasel words. instead to suit their own desires they will gather around them a great number of teachers.

They'll certainly get words. They'll certainly get teachers. But these will be teachers who just say what their itching words want to hear. The faithful minister of the word warns, commends, encourages.

[30 : 31] He has a pattern of sound words, of healthy words. wisdom, not something that to be learned by rote by the people but rather that they might understand.

They might be able to go on and pass on that understanding to others. It is wisdom, that understanding of God's word, that whole counsel of God, holding back nothing that is profitable, which is what will protect us from the flood and the storm and the wolf at the door.

That's good advice. It's not just for Timothy, but for all of us. Let us hold fast to the words that God gives. I have so much, so often, even those who claim to be, certainly those who claim to be Christian, even those who claim to be evangelical seem to have lost sight of this.

They seem to want to put something else in place of the God's word. But that's the only weapon we've got. They say that in aerial combat there's only one tactic.

You get on your opponent's tail and stay there, and you stop your opponent getting on your tail. It's the only, if you read Biggles, it's the only, only way, it's the only trick to play.

[31 : 54] It doesn't matter whether you've got a handgun or laser-guided missile, it's still the same tactic. We have only one trick to play, we have only one way, it is the word of God that converts people.

Nothing else, nothing else is up to the task. So let's stop there, and let's sing again. Amen.