PM Ezekiel 3:16-21 & Acts 20:17-38 Farewell

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[0:00] Two passages. The first one is from Ezekiel. I don't often read from Ezekiel, chapter 3, verses 16 to 21.

That's on page 839 in the Church Bibles. A little bit special, this passage to me, because when I was baptized, as you know, I was baptized as a believer.
And it was the practice of the minister of the church to find some suitable scripture verse to encourage us in our Christian walk. And the verse he gave to me was actually verse 17 of this chapter.
He knew that I had already begun preaching by that time. So let's read these verses, 16 to 21 of Ezekiel 3.
If he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning.
[2:51] And you will have delivered your soul. That verse, Son of Man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel.

I have it inscribed on a plaque sitting in my study as a reminder to me every time I prepare to preach. Now let's turn to our second reading, which is Acts chapter 20.
And as with this morning, we're coming to the end of a long series of sermons. This is Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders.
Reading Acts 20 from verse 17 to verse 38. That's on page 1120. 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.
[4:20] 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 towards God and 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 received 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.
[5:49] Pay careful attention to yourselves and all the flock of whom 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

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receive.
[7:16] 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.

And they accompanied him to the ship. We're going to sing again now. Well let's turn now to the word of God and that passage we read in Acts chapter 20.
I've entitled this sermon Farewell for two reasons. First for the obvious reason that Paul is saying farewell here to the Ephesian elders.
but also because we are effectively saying farewell tonight to Paul's missionary journeys. I started this series three years ago with Paul's first journey with Barnabas to Cyprus and Asia Minor in Acts 13 and 14.
We've followed him on through his second journey through Asia Minor across to Europe visiting Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea Athens and Corinth and briefly Ephesus in Acts 15 to 18.
[9:07] then on with his third journey back to Ephesus for a longer stay and then on to Macedonia and Greece and back to Troas in Acts 19 and 20.

He's now on his way up to Jerusalem with gifts from the Gentile churches to show their solidarity with their Jewish brethren and he wants to be there by Pentecost.
So although the journey takes him past Ephesus he doesn't want to stop there but instead he calls the elders to meet him at Miletus which is a seaport nearby.
He's expecting trouble in Jerusalem and he doesn't expect to see these Ephesian elders again.
And this therefore is his farewell message to them. This is effectively the end of the third missionary journey.
[10:25] The rest of Acts is concerned with his visit to Jerusalem and his later journey to Rome as a prisoner. There is reason to think that he was later released from prison and that there was a fourth missionary journey but that's another story.

Now this farewell message to the Ephesian elders is a wonderful message. It's relevant to all churches in all ages and there is much here that is relevant to the whole congregation not just to the elders.
If we had to sum it up Paul is saying to them I finished my work now you must finish yours.
And that message reverberates down to us today. We in our generation must continue with that same work.
I want to look at it under three headings. Paul's example in verse 18 to 27 Paul's exhortation 28 to 35 and Paul's farewell 36 to 38.
[11:58] First though let's remember who he is talking to in verse 17. From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

What was this church and who were these elders? The church at Ephesus seems to have been founded about AD 52 probably when Paul stopped there briefly on his second missionary journey.
He preached there in the synagogue and no doubt there were some who became believers. He left Priscilla and Aquila in charge promising to return.
While he was away Apollos had come preaching powerfully but knowing only the baptism of John and Priscilla and Aquila had to put him right.
When Paul returned to Ephesus he found twelve disciples who knew only the baptism of John and had never heard of the Holy Spirit and he had to put them right.
[13:31] But after that rather shaky beginning he had had a very successful ministry. First he had reasoned in the synagogue persuading them about the kingdom of God and then when as in so many places the Jews rejected him he had moved to the hall of Tyrannus hired hall and continued preaching there.

And he stayed for three years. I think that's the longest that Paul ever stayed anywhere. It says in Acts 19 verse 10 all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord both Jews and Greeks.
That sounds like a tremendous achievement when we think of Asia today but of course Asia was the name of a Roman province in those days. Even so there were thousands of people and everyone had heard the gospel through Paul.
But eventually there was a riot. Acts 19 describes the crowds chanting for two hours great is Artemis or Diana of the Ephesians and Paul had left for Macedonia.

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That was about AD 56 and another year or so had passed since then. These elders then don't know any of their names but they had only been Christians for about five years.
[15:24] Today someone who has been a Christian for five years we regard them as a babe in Christ. No way would we give them authority as elders. But in these early days they had to get on with the job.

These were the most mature men in the congregation these were the ones who were chosen to lead the church. And they have already faced major challenges haven't they?
Both false teaching and persecution. The word translated as elders is presbyteroi from which we get our word Presbyterian.
Presbyterianism is simply ruled by the elders. But before you say ah here we are here's Presbyterianism in the New Testament well not quite because these are all elders in one church whereas modern Presbyterianism of course is a geographical concept also with presbyters meeting from different churches.
In verse 28 he calls them overseers Greek word there interestingly is episkopoi from which we get episcopalian ruled by bishops.
[16:46] So these elders are also presbyters and they're bishops as well. But again no we're not seeing the start of episcopalianism in the modern form.

These bishops are all ruling in one church. they're not ruling over a whole group of churches as modern bishops do.
These bishops are all equal as indeed presbyters are in the Presbyterian churches today. Elders overseers they're the same people.
These were the men in charge of the church. So what did Paul say to them? Well first we have Paul's example verses 18 to 27.
And he speaks here firstly of his past ministry in Ephesus in verses 18 to 21. And we could sum it up as its character its completeness and its content.
[18:05] First its character in verses 18 and 19. 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 tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

these are the marks of a true servant of God and all of them can be traced back to the example of Christ.
I've always been impressed as I read Acts at how closely Paul followed the example of his master. Christ was humble.
Remember how he washed his disciples feet. Christ often shed tears. Remember how he wept over Jerusalem.
And no one suffered more than Christ. Remember how the Jews plotted against him and persuaded Pilate to crucify him. Paul is walking in his master's footsteps humble, weeping over the church, weeping over the lost, and willing to suffer, even to die, for the sake of his master.
[19:40] Next we have its completeness in verse 20, how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house.

he preached everything, and he preached everywhere. Again, he is following his master.
Jesus could say to his father, John 17 8, I have given them the words that you gave me. Now you know that sometimes the words that Jesus spoke didn't go down so well.
When he spoke of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, the people were totally perplexed, and people began to drift away. When he said, I and my father are one, they picked up stones to throw at him.
But these were the words that his father had given him. He must declare the whole truth, whether people liked it or not. were the word into all the world.
[21:00] That sums up what we should be doing, doesn't it? And that's what Paul was doing. He hadn't only preached to them the easy things that they liked, but the difficult things as well.

And he had made sure that everyone heard. He'd preached publicly, and he'd preached from house to house.
Probably that means visiting church members, talking with them in their own homes, much in the manner as ministers of old used to catechize their flock.
Possibly it means also going from door to door. How else are you going to visit some people? You might never come into contact with them.

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By all means, he was determined that everyone would hear. Finally, verse 21, the content testifying both to Jews and Greeks of repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.
[22:11] Christ. That's the very heart of our gospel, isn't it? That is precisely what the Lord Jesus himself commanded us to preach.

Luke 24, 46, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.
Whatever we preach, and there are lots of things we should preach, about the Christian life, about the church, about the world to come, about social justice, if you like, all these things, they're important, but the message of repentance and faith must always be central.
That is what Christ commanded us to preach, and that is what Paul had preached in Ephesus. But now a new phase had begun in Paul's life, and so he goes on to speak of his present ministry, in verse 22 to 24.
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.
[23:49] 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.

Like his master again, Paul had set his face to go to Jerusalem. Christ went there to die for our sins. He knew that death awaited him, but he was willing to die to complete the work. Paul has a slightly less lofty aim.
He's going there to present that gift in Jerusalem. But nonetheless, he's going in the same spirit as his master.
He knows that troubles lie ahead, but he must go to Jerusalem, even if it costs him his life. And that is the attitude that we must all have, fulfilling Christ's mission even to the death.
[25:09] death. I think of that each year when I go along to watch the Good Neighbours traditional event in Dumfries.

I'm sure that's not how it's meant to be pronounced, but Good Neighbours, I can't quite get it, the Scots right. Those of you who've ever been there, you'll know that it comes to a climax with a ceremony at the Midsteeple, where the town charter of 1395 is read, and then the cornet takes the town's flag, and he promises to defend it to the death.
And each year the young man who does this seems to excel himself in making that more and more dramatic. To the death. well if a mere flag is worth dying for, how much more is the gospel of Christ?
We are to defend and proclaim the gospel to the death. For Paul, this was a simple matter of fulfilling his mission.
Jesus could say to the father in John 17 4, I have finished the work that you gave me to do. And Paul wants to be able to say the same.
[26:49] He believed passionately that the Lord wanted him to go no matter what other people were saying. The Lord had commanded him, the spirit had constrained him, and so he must go through with it, come what may.

So often we start things and then don't finish them. At the Olympic Games in the list of results, occasionally you will see the letters DNF.
Those letters stand for did not finish. Paul doesn't want DNF. written over his life.
He wants to be able to say I have finished the race. And so should we. Jesus speaks in Luke 14 of the man who began to build a tower, but he hadn't counted the cost.
And so to his shame he had to give up halfway through. Well Paul has counted the cost. And he has no intention of giving up.
[28:09] Heading for Jerusalem though means leaving Ephesus, maybe forever. And Paul ends therefore on a very solemn note in verse 25.

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.

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Paul has in mind undoubtedly that passage from Ezekiel which we read where the prophet is told son of man I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel.
if you warn the wicked and he turn from his wicked ways he will live. If he refuses to turn he will die. But if you fail to warn him his blood I will require at your hand. Paul had preached to them the whole counsel of God.
[29:23] If they listened good if they didn't well he was innocent of their blood. I wonder if we can say that we are innocent of the blood of the people of Dumfries.

Have we shared the gospel with them as much as we could? Paul had completed his work in Ephesus.
Now he's handing over to them. Which brings us to Paul's exhortation verses 28 to 35 how they now must continue his work.
He begins with this solemn charge in verse 28 pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God which he obtained with his own blood.
To pay attention first to themselves. They can't care for the church if their own lives are in disarray.
[30:39] But then they're to pay careful attention to the flock because that is their calling as elders. They are shepherds of the flock.

All the flock notice not just the easy ones who they like and get on well with but the difficult ones as well. Now Paul uses many images for the church the body the bride the temple here he calls us the flock of God and in this again he's following his master.
Jesus called us his sheep and called himself the good shepherd. Now this flock is precious to God. It was obtained or purchased with his own blood. How remarkable is that?
Suppose you were to see a flock of sheep out on the hillside dirty ragged diseased and someone told you farmer paid a good price for those sheep.
[32:10] Well how much? Told he paid five thousand pounds per sheep. What? How much? What are they? Are they some special breed?

No just ordinary sheep. I wouldn't pay ten pounds for them. that's how it is with the church.
What would you pay to be honest for the church as you see it? This little group of people with all their problems and all their conflicts are they worth anything?
Well Christ thinks they are and he has paid not five thousand pounds per head he has paid with his own blood. True they don't look much but Christ loves them and he has plans for them.
This little flock in Ephesus is precious to Christ. This little flock in Dumfries is precious to Christ.
[33:23] Christ. Well Christ has now entrusted this Ephesian flock to these elders.

What a responsibility. Christ's precious sheep for whom he shed his blood. Indeed Paul is very bold here and implies that it is the blood of God since Christ himself is God incarnate.
The son of God shed his blood for these sheep. Take care of them. This thought of how much Christ has paid for us is a favorite theme of Paul's.
In Ephesians 5 Christ loved the church and gave himself for it. Titus 2 Christ gave himself for us to redeem for himself a people for his own possession.
What a responsibility to take care of that treasure. That responsibility has been given to them by the Holy Spirit no less.
[34:40] Not just by men but by the Holy Spirit possibly referring to their ordination with the laying on of hands. And the church will need taking care of because there are serious dangers ahead.

Paul says in verse 29 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.
He's still keeping very close to his master isn't he? Jesus had spoken about wolves in the Sermon on the Mount beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.
Wolves will come in from outside, false teachers will arise from inside. These elders will have to be watchful and there's reason to think they were.
In Revelation 2 Christ praises the church at Ephesus for rejecting false apostles. Now we today face all kinds of wolves and false teachers and the elders among you you need to be especially on your guard watching out for the flock.
[36:12] so do the sheep. Let's not pile all the responsibility onto the elders. We sheep as well.

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We need to watch out for our own safety. We need to recognize the wolves. Make sure we're not eaten. Listen to the shepherd only. As Jesus said, my sheep hear my voice, the voice of a stranger they will not hear.
But the emphasis here is on the elders. Paul reminds them again of his own example.
Verse 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one of you with tears. They too are to be alert.
And I think it's fair to expect that if an elder is really taking their work seriously, there will be tears. There will be time when you weep over the church.
[37:17] Protect the flock from every danger. The greatest protection though is of course from God himself. Therefore verse 32 he concludes, I commend you to God and to the word of his grace which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among those who are sanctified.

It's not the elders themselves who are protecting the flock but the word of grace that they preach. We too must look to the word to encourage us and to build us up and to bring us safely to our inheritance in heaven.
Paul could have ended there but he can't resist one final reminder of his own example verses 33 to 35 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. This reminds us if we know our Old Testament of Samuel's farewell address to Israel 1 Samuel 12 3 Here I am 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 no one.
[39:01] But Paul's aim is not merely to declare his own innocence but to set before them that example. They're not to see the church as a way of getting rich.

They're to protect the flock not fleece them. Sadly throughout history there have been church leaders who have been in it for the money.
Bishops in their palaces televangelists taking their credit card donations. In contrast Paul had worked as a humble tent maker so that he could give to others.
That saying it's more blessed to give than to receive is not in the Gospels. Paul must have heard it elsewhere but by quoting it he gives it the divine imprimatur and we know it to be wonderfully true.
And with that he really does conclude. And so we come finally briefly to Paul's farewell verses 36 to 38 when he had said these things he knelt down and prayed with them all and there was much weeping on the part of all.
[40:20] 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 and they accompanied him to the ship.

What better way of parting than by praying and what a beautiful parting scene it is. I wonder what the onlookers thought, the ship's crew, the tradesmen, the other passengers.
No doubt they'd seen husbands and wives parting with tears but who were these men? Well they are the family of God.
I wonder if anyone watching thought I'd like to be part of a family like that. John Fawcett's hymn which we sang expresses it very well, Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.
As I told you he was moved by the tears of his church and decided to stay, Paul didn't have that option. He had to go.
[41:36] I want to close with four brief questions. First, to anyone who's not yet a Christian, isn't it time you became one? Preachers have stood here week after week Paul, preaching repentance and faith in Christ.

You can't say that you've never heard. You have heard the gospel. Most of you, countless times. If you still reject it, you will only have yourself to blame.
them. But every Christian that you know is longing for you to come to Christ, to find forgiveness and to be part of his family.
Secondly, to the elders of the church, do you realize the responsibility that you have? the Holy Spirit has made you overseers of the church of God which he purchased with his own blood.
Christ died for the church. It's very, very precious to him. Never neglect the duty that you have.
[43:02] Never speak lightly of the church. do your utmost to take care of it. Thirdly, to the whole church, do you realize how precious you are to Christ?

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Paul says elsewhere, you were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God. Christ died for us. Therefore, we must live for him. Finally, to everyone, will you be able to say at the end of your life, I have finished the work that God gave me to do?
God gave an extraordinary amount of work to Paul, but he accomplished it. You and I probably have rather less to do. how easy it is to get absorbed in other things and to leave God's work undone.
May the Lord help us to serve him faithfully as Paul did and to finish the race and obtain the crown. Amen.
[44:24] Our closing psalm is Psalm 48b.

We're going to sing the whole psalm. It's 14 verses, which sounds quite daunting, but really the whole psalm holds together.
We can't chop it up into little bits. Let's sing the whole of this beautiful psalm. It's on page 64. Psalm 48b.
Great is the Lord, his praise all else excels. In our God's city, on his holy hill. Mount Zion is the joy of all the earth, so high and fair like mountains of the north.
Here is the city where the great king dwells. Like Psalm 87 this morning, speaking at the time, particularly of Jerusalem, but looking forward prophetically to the glory of the church.
[45:33] Psalm 48b. if you have to have the which is the people of the to the who of the going to the this is the lip the that the that of the Thank you.

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