

Shepherd

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church family. So, like Adam said, Acts chapter 20, starting at verse 17, and we're going to read till the end of the chapter. Now, from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

And when they came to him, he said to them, You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

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

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

But I do not account my life of any value, nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

[1 : 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. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

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

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

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

[2 : 42] I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who are 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 Christ, how he himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

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

And they accompanied him to the ship. This is the word of the Lord. Well, good morning, everyone. Well, will you pray with me as we come to God's word?

Now, Father, as we come to Acts 20, I pray that your word would fill our minds and hearts so that, as we just sang, our hearts would rejoice afresh in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[4 : 02] In his name I pray. Amen. Well, how should we understand what we are even doing today, ordaining Martin?

Now, I'm sure he's loving the spotlight today. Ordination sounds a bit institutional, doesn't it? A bit over the top? Like, Martin is going to have the authority to preach and govern in the vast denomination we call Grace Evangelical Church.

Now, if it's only about the formal job as a staff member, we legally did that when we voted unanimously to appoint Martin.

We've already done that. What are we doing today? And most people listening this morning aren't elders. What's your role in all this anyway?

Like, have you already switched off? We got this flyer in our church mailbox this week and a certain Tom urges this.

[5 : 22] Prayerfully read the Bible, particularly the New Testament, by yourself, without any church influence.

And applying what you read, there will be a blessed eternity for you. Now, it's a bit sad because this is obviously coming from a place of hurt, of religious authority.

Some people, when we talk ordination, might have their guard up. It sounds like we're over-investing authority and it's dangerous.

But I'm guessing most people, most of us here today, we're probably more in danger of just being a bit passive. Something significant is happening to Martin. Good for him.

The church is getting more staff hours. Good for this institution. But does it really affect you, us? If you haven't had a chance to read the vows you're going to make later this morning, can I just tell you what you're about to promise?

[6 : 32] I want to give you a bit of time to consider this. You might be a bit surprised. Do you receive Martin, as from the hand of Christ, to be your elder?

Not just elder of this institution, your elder. Do you promise to receive the word of truth from his lips with meekness and with love? And do you promise to submit to Martin?

There's that S word. As he discharges this Christ-given pastoral ministry among us. Do you promise to remember Martin in prayer?

To encourage him in his work and to cooperate with him for the extension of God's kingdom and Christ's glory. Now we're calling them vows.

These are promises. How many vows have you made recently? I signed up to some email marketing the other day to get some cheaper meals at a hotel.

[7 : 36] But I can opt out of that any time I want. Do you have a marketplace view of church? While ever the elders are giving you the service you want, that's great, but you can opt out whenever you want.

Vows is a bit stronger than that. My wedding vows were much, much more binding. It's total self-giving until death do us part.

So I don't want to make too much of this on the other hand either, okay? But I can only see one of two options for what we're doing today. Either we're about to play some games where none of us actually expect to believe what we're promising, all for the sake of religious ceremony.

Either that's what we're doing, we're playing games, or what's happening today is that we're all entering a deep relational commitment.

Now, we've known and loved Martin as a brother for decades, but the relationship is changing because of what Christ is calling him to do amongst us.

[8 : 53] As we consider what God's calling is for elders in Acts 20, I think what we see there is deep relational commitment.

Now, to see this, I want to just compare, like have a think about what is the role of a pastor, of an elder? What exactly are we expecting Martin to do?

What image are we going to have in mind? What captures it? What's the job title? Let me just list a few options. It is a pastor's role to be the head of a charity.

Some people will contact the church asking for money because that's what the church is for. We're a charity. Is the image we should have a political rally supporter?

People will say, use your influence, pastor, to get support in this community for the latest social and political issue. Is the image we should have a life coach?

[10 : 02] People will come to Martin with their goals for their life. I need your advice. How do I reach these goals? Is he a life coach? Is he a psychologist?

Is he a psychologist? Understanding all the mental health disorders? Is he a Christian online influencer?

I read articles that if you're not posting online, pastor, you're not showing your people how to engage in this world. You need to be online and active.

Is he a visionary for church growth? Our evangelical friends of Reach Australia, which we share so much in common, but their target is 5% conversion growth annually.

It's measurable, but if you don't reach that, Martin, have you failed? Sorry, I'm going to say it as strongly as I can. Are you meant to be a visionary? Is he meant to be a visionary for church growth? [11:04] Is he meant to be an evangelist? Stop spending so much time at your desk preparing a sermon. Get in the community. Are you meant to be a people manager, like running the church, organising all the volunteering?

Are you meant to be a building developer? How many pastors get caught up in, let's build bigger buildings? Are you meant to be a prince of preachers? You will be compared to the best preachers everyone's listening to online.

Is that the main image? Now, we could keep going. A funeral director, a marriage celebrant, a financial manager, a policy developer, administrator, a networker with other church leaders, a missionary supporter, a discipler, a trainer of the next generation of pastors, a conference organiser, a marketing director, a chaplain visiting the sick and dying, a friend to the lonely, an author, a fundraiser.

You haven't made your vows just yet, man. The doors are open. My point is, there's competing expectations.

That's my point. I'm not saying pastors are more busy. We're all in the struggle in this life. That's not my point. There's just competing expectations. What even is the job of a pastor?

[12:35] I want to ask, what does God expect of pastors? And this is where Acts, I love Acts 20, speaking to the elders in Ephesus.

This is the only speech in Acts that's for believers. The rest are to unbelievers. And so it's giving us a model for a healthy church.

And I want to focus especially on verse 28, which is printed in your outlines. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

It helps us get back to the biblical roots of what God expects of elders. So what image best clarifies the relationship Martin is entering amongst us?

God's image is shepherd. Shepherd this flock. Now we've got seven bishops in this church.

[13:53] I don't know if you knew that or not. The elders who are called in verse 17, in verse 28 are called overseers. It's just there's three terms for the one job.

Elder, overseer, and shepherd. So elder suggests spiritual maturity. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the church is called to respect and follow the example of that maturity.

Overseer suggests the idea of responsibility and there is authority. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the church has said, submit, obey their lead.

But what is all that maturity and authority for? Shepherding. That's the verb. Pastor is the Latin for shepherd.

Pay careful attention to all the flock. Now we elders are still in the flock.

[15:00] I'm going to mix metaphors. I think it's significant. It doesn't say here over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, but in which.

We're not just to pay careful attention to the flock out there as if we've got it all together. Pay careful attention to yourselves, elders.

We're still sheep who can go astray and we need feeding and mending and encouragement. We're still sheep. So to use a David Quarterwoodism, we're sheep with a high-vis vest on.

I don't know. It's a weird image. Let's see if it resonates or not. We're still sheep. And this flock doesn't ultimately belong to Martin or anyone.

God purchased each sheep with the blood of his very own son. This flock is that precious to him. And our God-given mandate is care for the faith of my sheep.

[16:09] Know my sheep well enough that you can pay careful attention. Now, at this point, I'm quite, well, I'm at least a little bit aware of my failures and limitations here.

But my main point is, here's God's mandate for Martin and for all us elders. Be a shepherd. 1 Peter 5 says, we will give an account to the chief shepherd when he appears.

Here's the thing. If others think you're succeeding, Martin, building a bigger building or impressive online presence or expanding ministries and numbers are growing here, that opinion may count for absolutely nothing if on the last day the chief shepherd says, why didn't you care for my sheep?

On the flip side, others might think you're failing and their opinion might count for absolutely nothing if the chief shepherd says on that last day, well done, you cared for my sheep.

It's a shepherd. That's the image we need to have in mind. That's the kind of relationship we're entering here.

[17 : 38] And I love Acts 20 because it's just, it's soaking, it's dripping wet with affection and concern. You can't be a shepherd following Paul's own example without deeply loving your people.

I listened to a famous US pastor say about his retirement that people came up to him so grateful for his ministry in tears and he had no idea who they were.

I don't want that to happen. There's something deeply relational about the shepherd and sheep image.

We're limited creatures. We can't know each person equally and fully across the church.

I think it's a gift to this church that we do have seven shepherds, different personalities, different gifts. But we're called to know our sheep that we can pay careful attention to each sheep's relationship with God.

[18 : 57] Notice in verse 20, Paul's example. I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable. Paul didn't just simply have a curriculum he was teaching.

He knew his people well enough and we see this in his letters. He knows what to feed them. It wasn't just a curriculum. He knew you need to hear this teaching in this situation.

And it wasn't just public ministry. Paul taught publicly and from house to house. And I don't think he was simply after numbers.

Because verse 31, For three years I did not cease night or day to admonish, to warn everyone with tears. He's crying for these sheep of his.

It is deeply relational. Pay careful attention. Know what truth to feed. Private instruction as well as public.

[20 : 09] When anything is taking people away from faith in Christ, persevere. He's in tears for them. He's not like, Oh, well, we don't need them.

We can grow the church without them. No. He's in tears. For three years, I'm warning you, come back to faith. Now, I'm thankful that this is a shared privilege and burden.

At times I'm annoyed when other elders don't share my convictions. But so far, the Holy Spirit has brought me back to my senses that it is such a good thing that this church doesn't rest on my wisdom alone.

It would be in big trouble if it did. There's another group here that we're called to shepherd, and that's yourselves. Each other as elders.

And we all know that it's all too common for leadership to be a power struggle. Division. But we're called pay careful attention to yourselves.

[21 : 16] There's even deep relationship amongst the elders. I need your correction, man. I need your encouragement. I need your rebuke. Don't you love the end of this passage?

Instead of a power struggle, look at the elders. They're on their knees, in prayer, knowing how dependent they are on God's wisdom and power, and they're not co-managers of an organisation. They're brothers. They're in tears together. That vulnerable with each other, in tears together. The kind of shepherding God calls us to, it's crying for the sheep.

It's that deeply invested, but it's crying together as shepherds. It's deeply relational. We haven't got to yet how a shepherd's supposed to care.

Our authority isn't inherent in our position, in us as a person. Our authority is as much as we faithfully feed the word of his grace.

[22 : 32] Paul, in this passage, says how he cared for his people multiple ways. He proclaimed, he taught, he declared, he preached.

And there's different ways he describes the content of that. Turn to God and repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus, the gospel of God's grace, the kingdom, the whole will of God, the word of his grace.

When you visit someone in hospital, or you stand with families at the gravesite, unable to look at the coffin, when people come with very complex situations in their life, when marriages are deeply hurting and losing hope, and someone's doubting their salvation, someone is just caught in sinful habits, and they just don't have the strength to fight.

Some are finding joy in worldly things and strain. There is a proper sense of inadequacy, like what on earth do I have to say in this situation?

Well, this passage says, you have a wonderful, powerful message, the gospel of the grace of God. That's what we all need day in and day out. A shepherd and flock is a deep relationship, but it's a relationship where you're constantly pointing us away from yourself.

[24 : 20] We need the grace of God. And God's sheep will love it when you continually point to his sufficient grace.

They will recognise their chief shepherd's voice. That's him. That's the one who died for me. So Martin, feed us with the word of his grace, publicly, privately.

Fight for us when anything false is taking our hearts away from the word of his grace. And fight with the word of his grace.

I love how Paul explains his aim in ministry in Philippians 1.25. He wants his fruitful labour to be for his people's progress and joy in their faith.

In 2 Corinthians 1.24 he says, not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your... And you expect him to say faith, but he says joy.

[25 : 35] We're working with you for your joy. I don't think biblical knowledge on its own is the end point.

That could just create pride. We're not after a church full of activity and volunteering. That's not satisfying enough. That's not the job description.

We're not content with an external appearance, like dressing up well and an external appearance of obedience. We want ourselves and all the flock so profoundly satisfied by the grace of God that joy just takes hold of us and gives us hope in trials and the taste of joy makes us want to be hungry, to know his word more and that joy creates a grace-filled community.

That joy that gives us... shows how the idols and the false satisfaction in this world goes, oh, that's nothing compared to what the grace of God can give me.

We want joy that overflows in sacrificial service. We want joy that takes costly risks for the kingdom of God. As shepherds, I think we're called to our people's joy.

[26 : 59] Our joy as shepherds and the flock's joy in the grace of God. Well, how can we all love Martin as our shepherd as from the hand of Christ?

Receive Martin with thankfulness that he's proclaiming Christ for your joy. Can you pray for us as elders?

Pray for our personal walk with the Lord. Pray for us as a team of shepherds that would actually show grace to each other.

You can love Martin by holding him accountable that he's faithfully teaching and refuting anything that contradicts with the gospel of the grace of God.

And you can love him. There's going to be times when what Martin says when he speaks into your life is going to hurt a little bit.

[28 : 07] Or maybe a lot. I don't know. Now, it may come from selfish motives. It might. It might come from error. He may just misunderstand the situation.

But you can love him by pausing and considering. He might be fighting for your joy. He wants you to be totally satisfied in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's many things I admire about you, Martin. your model as a husband and a father. Your humility. Your care in studying and teaching the word of his grace.

Your prayerfulness. Your REM cover band. But the most important things as a shepherd, you can't do.

You can't lay down your life for the sins of your sheep. You're not asked to do that, but you can't.

You can't change a single attitude.

[29 : 29] You can't bring conviction of sin. You can't reveal the glory of Jesus Christ to our minds and hearts. You can declare it, but you can't reveal it. You can contact straying sheep.

You can pray for them, but you can't satisfy their hearts afresh to bring them back. You can't ensure that anyone perseveres in their faith.

You can't sustain your own joy and faith, but our good shepherd can. So verse 32.

We 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.

George Mueller, who founded orphanages in England, over 10,000 children went through.

[30 : 43] He once said, my first task every morning is to get my heart happy in Jesus. I'm of no use to anybody until I get my heart happy in Jesus. So I'm going to just finish by suggesting mine.

Get yourself happy and joyful in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and then pay careful attention to this flock. It's a fight for our joy in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we commend you to the word of his grace. How about we pray together? Lord Jesus, we praise you that this is your church and that your sheep hear your voice through the word of your grace.

We thank you for your great promises that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion. So we pray that you would use Martin to faithfully declare the glory of your son and I pray that you would help all of us to receive your word from his lips.

And I pray that you would make us a church that's deeper and deeper joyful in the knowledge of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we commit Martin to you in Jesus' name.

[32 : 20] Amen. Amen.