

The work of the pastor

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[0 : 00] The first reading is from Acts chapter 20 verses 17 to 38 and that's on page 1120 in the Bibles on your seats.

So it's Acts chapter 20 verses 17 to 38. 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 inflictions await me.

[1 : 07] 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 receive 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 of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

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. 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 minister 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, how he himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

[2 : 31] 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. The second reading is taken from Paul's second letter to Timothy, chapter 2, verses 14 to 19.

And that's on page 1198. So chapter 2, 2 Timothy, chapter 2, verse 14. Remind them of these things and charge them before God not to quarrel about words which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene.

[3 : 43] Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.

But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal, the Lord knows those who are his. And let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.

Well, good morning, everyone. Do turn back to that first reading we had, to page 1120 to Acts chapter 20.

And you may also find it helpful to look at the outline on the back of the server sheets. It says there that we'll be looking at, right at the top, that verses 17 to 27 this week, actually that was last week, we're more focusing on 28 to 38.

Shall I lead us in prayer as we prepare to look at these verses together? Our Father, we've just sung Speak, O Lord, but we know that actually you have spoken to us in the Bible and you always speak to us when we read it.

[4 : 49] And so, in a sense, the real question is whether we would listen and how we would listen as you speak to us. And we pray this morning that you would help us to be those who listen eagerly and who then put into practice what we hear.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. So what is the job of a pastor, a church leader?

If you were to ask that question to the man on the street or even observe different vicars say and what they get up to, you'd get a whole range of answers, I guess. For example, is a church leader a kind of Christianized social or aid worker or counselor whose job is to look after people's very real, material and felt needs?

Or is a pastor primarily a community figure whose job it is to represent the church at civic events and organize the church fate each year? Is he there primarily to take weddings, funerals and baptisms to visit the sick and have tea with old ladies, perhaps?

Or are Christian ministers religious holy men? Maybe monk-like figures who are to fast, pray and set an example. Or priest-like figures who perform special rituals to absolve people's sin and make them acceptable before God.

[6 : 07] I guess you wouldn't have to go very far to find church leaders who conform to each of those ideas. Well, when it comes to the job of a pastor, fortunately, we're not left in the dark because the Bible tells us.

And this speech of the Apostle Paul to the leaders of the church in Ephesus in Acts 20 contains one of the Bible's clearest descriptions of what a church leader ought to do as Paul bids farewell to Ephesus and hands over the baton of responsibility for the church there.

Today we're looking at verses 28 to 38 and the tears and embraces described in the final verses remind us what a moving event it was as the great apostle leaves the Ephesian elders for the very last time after three whole years with them.

Last week, if you were here, you'll remember that we looked at verses 17 to 27 in which Paul recounted his example among the Ephesians in the past, his integrity of life and lip as he faithfully proclaimed the whole counsel of God to them amidst much opposition.

And then he laid out his expectations for the future as he prepared for suffering in every city with a single-minded determination to keep testifying to God's grace.

[7 : 26] But now in the closing verses of the speech, Paul ends with an exhortation as to what the Ephesian leaders are therefore to do in the present. And if much of the emphasis in verses 17 to 27 was perhaps on the need to testify to the gospel and call unbelievers to repentance and faith, Paul now moves on to the other great task of the gospel minister, to shepherd the flock, to care for those who are already Christians.

And it seems he wants to impress on the Ephesian elders three particular things which we're going to look at in turn. So first of all, he reminds them of their great responsibility and you'll see that that's the first heading on the outlines on the service sheets.

A great responsibility. Let me read verse 28. Verse 28. Paul says to the elders, 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.

Now just as an aside, the word translated care here literally means shepherd or pastor. So it's striking that in verses 17 to 38, church leaders are called elders, pastors, and as we also see in verse 28, overseers, which is the Greek word for a bishop.

It's a reminder that in the New Testament, elders, pastors, and bishops are interchangeable terms. And remember from last time that the primary task of each is to teach the Bible.

[9 : 03] So it's a nonsense to say, as some people do, that some people have good teaching gifts but others are good pastorally, as if pastoral care is all about being cuddly and a good listener.

Of course there's nothing wrong with being cuddly and a good listener. But pastors in the Bible are teachers and they shepherd the flock by teaching. That's what pastoral ministry is.

And it's what people most need in hard times anyway. In the same way, an overseer or bishop is just a pastor. That's why historically in the Church of England, people are ordained as presbyters or elders but consecrated as bishops.

Bishops aren't a separate order of leader. Just pastors set aside for a particular role but who ought still, first and foremost, to be teachers. So it would actually be theologically correct to refer to Simon and Nigel and Chris Idle and myself as bishops.

So please remember to address us as right reverends next time you talk to us. I can't think of anything that would wind up Nigel so much actually. But what is it that these elders or pastors or bishops in Acts 20 are to do?

[10:17] Well there's lots in verse 28. In fact the Puritan Richard Baxter wrote a whole book of over 250 pages on this one verse alone. But just notice for now what the responsibility is and why it's so great.

The responsibility is to pay careful attention to keep watch over yourselves and all the flock. Striking isn't it that the elders' first responsibility is not to the flock but themselves.

The great Scottish preacher Robert Murray Mishane famously said my people's greatest need is my personal holiness. You see if these elders stopped looking after themselves spiritually if they neglected their quiet times forgot to pray and failed to apply their sermons to themselves they'd soon shipwreck their own Christian lives set a bad example and so failed to be of any use.

When they do the safety briefing at the start of a flight the cabin crew always tell parents in the event of a water landing to put their own life jackets on first before their children's don't they?

The point being that they can't save others if they aren't making sure they're okay themselves. And so it is for the pastor. It's why we must pray for our leaders to be godly and to be growing in prayerfulness and love for Jesus.

[11:40] And why we must make sure we protect their day off each week and don't overburden them so their spiritual lives and family lives don't suffer. But then notice the pastor also has the responsibility to pay careful attention to their flock also.

Paul doesn't say here what that involves presumably because what he's just told them about his own ministry in verses 18 to 27 is what it looks like to keep watch over a flock. the Ephesian elders were to continue Paul's work of teaching the whole counsel of God to all God's people.

But Paul does say here why they were to do so. Why this responsibility he was giving them was a great one a serious task. Verse 28 again 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.

The responsibility was a great one because it came from God and involved caring for the church of God. And it's noticeable how each person of the Trinity is mentioned here.

So these elders have been made overseers by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had given them this responsibility. God himself in his sovereignty had appointed them to this role.

[13:05] What an awesome thought. You don't want to mess up when it's God who's given you a job do you? But what a great encouragement too. Sometimes I talk to young Christians who are considering full time gospel work.

And they talk about how their parents sometimes even Christian parents don't want them to do it because it somehow seems second class or isn't respectable. But what could be a more noble task than this?

British ambassadors received commissions from the Queen but these elders had done so from the Holy Spirit himself. And again while of course this doesn't mean that church leaders won't make mistakes I guess it does mean that we should respect our leaders and submit to them because they've been given oversight of us by God himself.

But notice that the responsibility Paul was handing on wasn't great simply because of who was over these elders but also who was under them because they were to care for God's church God's own people a people so precious that God in the person of his son Jesus Christ had shed his own blood to rescue them.

Now if you're here this morning and you're not currently a Christian believer this is how you become a member of the church God's people and it's the truth at the heart of Christianity which we'll be remembering when we celebrate the Lord's Supper later that Jesus God's son died on the cross to

pay the penalty for our sins that we might be forgiven and adopted into God's family.
[14 : 44] It's the message church leaders are to teach actually and what an awesome responsibility it gives them there to care for people so precious to Jesus that he shed his own blood to save them.

Certainly an antidote to being half-hearted or idle in ministry. And before we move on just notice at the start of verse 28 that these elders were to care for all the flock even the weak ones who could easily be overlooked which may partly explain the emphasis we have in verses 33 to 35 about working hard to be able to help the weak rather than ministering for the sake of personal gain or imposing a burden on the needy.

So first of all the Ephesian elders had a great responsibility and the next verses explain why they needed to shepherd the flock with such careful attention because secondly there was a grave danger a grave danger you see these church leaders would not only need to keep watch over the flock but also to watch out to watch out for savage wolves let me read from 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 therefore be alert remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears the sheep imagery that Paul uses here to describe Christians reminds us that like sheep we're vulnerable as Christians and easily led astray and it also reminds us that we have dangerous enemies who are as harmful to the church as fierce wolves are to flocks of sheep you see we're to expect there to be false teachers in the church they're inevitable

Paul says they will come in not might come in and faithful church leaders need to be on their guard against them to protect the sheep from them because they're very dangerous so just notice where they come from in verse 29 we're told fierce wolves will come in among you so they may come from outside perhaps a new but attractive sounding message blows in from North America or another church down the road and becomes popular appealing to us because it's different or seems exciting or offers some kind of shortcut when it comes to living the Christian life but more terrifyingly this grave danger also comes from within notice from insiders verse 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them Paul warns these elders that some of them would one day distort the truth and lead the sheep astray and of course that's exactly what happened in Ephesus in this church

Paul was right because we read in 1 Timothy 1 that Paul later has to leave Timothy in Ephesus to charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine false teachers had sprung up or as we read in 2 Timothy 2 in our second reading two men called Hymenes and Philetus later swerved from the truth teaching a message that spread like gangrene causing spiritual destruction and upsetting people's faith these were men who had once seemingly been faithful but now had swerved from the truth it would have been so dangerous because they probably drifted gradually and would have been well known and respected by the Ephesian church and given Paul's words in Acts 20 it seems reasonable to assume Hymenes and Philetus were probably among those elders that Paul addressed here in Myletus but they didn't heed his words

[18 : 57] I can think of a number of Christian leaders in recent years who would once have seemed very sound in their teaching but who've since denied what the Bible teaches about the work of Jesus on the cross or human sexuality for example they may perhaps have written best-selling books or be bishops or archbishops even but Paul's verdict on them would be fierce wolves I guess so Paul's teachers are inevitable they even come from inside and notice also they're insidious that's what makes these wolves so dangerous verse 30 tells us they speak twisted things or distort the truth what they say sounds very good it's close to the truth it's half true even that's so often the case with false teaching isn't it it's not out and out heresy it wouldn't be such a danger if it was but the problem is a matter of over-emphasizing something or what gets left out or Bible verses taken out of context twisting the truth perhaps the problem is saying true things about

God's love without ever mentioning his judgment or promising forgiveness without mentioning the need for repentance or promising something now that isn't guaranteed until heaven which seems to have been one of the mistakes that Hymenaeus and Philetus made or suggesting that some parts of the Bible are culturally limited or we can ignore them because Paul says it not Jesus the danger is very subtle and notice too that they do therefore enjoy partial success these false teachers they make inroads they draw away the disciples after them or it's what they intend to do Paul says Hymenaeus and Philetus his teaching spread quickly like gangrene in Ephesus it was popular big

churches or fast growing movements or global denominations are not necessarily the sign of being the genuine article you see so only those who like Paul in verse 27 teach the whole council of God which incidentally is one of the reasons it's so good that we teach systematically through the Bible as we do at Grace Church so as not to miss anything out who are faithful shepherds of God's church so Paul warns the Ephesian elders of a grave danger and the application for them was to protect the flock as Paul had done to be vigilant and actively looking out for wolves like a shepherd scouring the landscape for predators so he can protect his sheep look at verse 31 therefore be alert remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears Paul had spent three whole years night and day admonishing or warning the Ephesians because he knew how grave the danger was and how vulnerable they were I've often heard faithful pastors criticise for being too negative or too critical of opposing views being too quick to point out error or going on and on about it but Paul warned people every day and every night for three years and while of course

I guess it's possible to be too quick to judge or to fall out over minor issues or be more interested in doctrinal purity than in the gospel nonetheless less is actually part of how we safeguard the gospel that we expose error and his commentary on these verses John Stott put it like this the shepherds of Christ's flock have a double duty to feed the sheep by teaching the truth and to protect them from wolves by warning of error this emphasis is unpopular today we are frequently told always to be positive in our teaching and never negative but those who say this have either not read the new testament or having read it they disagree with it for the Lord Jesus and his apostles refuted error themselves and urged us to do the same one wonders if it is the neglect of this obligation which is a major cause of today's theological confusion helpful words I think now for those here who aren't Christian believers and for whom this might all seem rather remote can I say that this is why there are so many different forms of Christianity on offer because there are people out there offering a Christianity light in order to make themselves popular or their message palatable it's also why if you're in Eagles or Jam you may get taught a different version of Christianity in our rest at school in my experience there are many people who've rejected a counterfeit version of the Bible's teaching without ever having encountered authentic Christian teaching not every form of what passes for Christianity is the same or genuine so we need to be discerning why not pick up the Bible afresh and see what it actually is that Jesus and his apostles taught I promise you it's the best news you'll ever hear well we're nearly done but much more briefly as we close I want us to notice one final thing that Paul impresses on these

[24 : 33] Ephesian elders the positive note of encouragement with which he leaves them because he reminds them that we serve a gracious God a gracious God let's pick up Paul's speech at verse 32 he said all he needs to and having finished the commissioning service he commits his listeners to God's care before praying for them verse 32 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 imagine Paul's listeners may well have been wondering how they'd ever be faithful to this charge that they were being given how they could ever follow in Paul's footsteps in a world of wolves and hostility but Paul reminds them that they were only under shepherds and that their master was a gracious God who could sustain them and could forgive them when they failed in particular Paul reminds his listeners of the word of

God's grace it's God's grace you see found in his word the Bible God's undeserved mercy to frail sinful people which will keep the faithful pastor going grace isn't just the way into the Christian life but the way on not just a message for the non Christian to hear but also for the most experienced pastor to hold on to and what a great motivation there is to persevere here also God's grace is able to give these elders a future inheritance notice a prize far greater than the silver or gold in verse 33 that they might have been tempted to covet you see gospel ministers may receive little recognition in this world but a wonderful reward awaits those who stand firm in the next so let's be those who pray for Simon and our leaders here at Grace Church to daily remember God's grace and the inheritance that awaits those who remain faithful we have a gracious

God well we've come to the end of our study in Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian elders and returning to our question at the beginning can we see what it teaches us about the job of a pastor in every generation first and foremost the Christian leader isn't a counsellor or carer nor is he a priest or public figure but a pastor who shepherds his flock by teaching the life-giving truth of the gospel and refuting error that's what we're to look for in a church leader and what we're to pray for our

leaders so why don't I do what Paul does in verse 36 and finish by praying for those who have oversight of us here at Grace Church let me lead us together in prayer as we finish 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 our heavenly father we want to pray for our leaders here at Grace Church we pray in particular for Simon and for Jenny with the work that she does among women and Andy amongst our young people and we pray for them that you would help them to remember the great responsibility which you have entrusted to them we pray that they'd be encouraged as they remember that they have been appointed to this task in your sovereignty by you yourself and that they are to care for people so precious that they were bought with the blood of your own son the Lord Jesus please help them to be vigilant in watching out for the danger of fierce wolves who might come in among us and cause harm and we pray also that they would remember that you are a gracious God who gives them all the resources necessary to persevere in faithful Christian ministry and so we pray for ourselves also that you would help us to be those who pray for them and to be those who always long to sit under the kind of ministry that we see here in Acts 20 that we might be protected from wolves ourselves and that the good news of the gospel might continue to go out through this church family here at Grace Church and we ask it in Jesus' name amen amen thank you to thank the chsiet you an who