

Paul Farewells Ephesus (2) - Keep Watch

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on July the 18th, 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, Paul Farewells Ephesus, Keep Watch, and is from Acts chapter 20, verses 17 to 38.

You might like to keep that passage open. I should also say that this is actually part two of the sermon. Last week I preached on this same passage, and there's a lot in this passage, so we've done it in two parts.

And just to remind you, Paul is at a place called Miletus, and we actually, to show that we're really with it at Holy Trinity, we're a multimedia presentation. We've actually got an original photo of Paul at Miletus, and we saw this last week, but for those who weren't here, just to remind you, not again. I actually thought we should have a caption competition. Where have all the elders gone? Or Paul kept on preaching and preaching and preaching, and the Ephesian elders had to go home.

[1 : 11] The buses could not wait. Or maybe this is the caption for this picture. Richmond's number one supporter turns up 2,000 years too early for the match at the Miletus cricket ground.

Well, let's pray. Oh God, we pray that you'll help us to understand and apply these words to our own lives, so that we may be more faithful stewards of the grace you've entrusted to us, and bring Jesus Christ's glory.

Amen. Well, some of you know I'm going on holidays tomorrow, and I'm doing a lot of driving on holidays, and people keep saying to me today, be careful.

Drive carefully. Sometimes think, no, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to drive recklessly. It's much more fun. But often people say, be careful, don't they?

Do this carefully. Be careful. When people are sick, we say, take care of yourself. Sometimes when we say goodbye to somebody, we say, take care. When electricians climb ladders, we say to them, rightly, be careful.

[2 : 21] And when teenagers do anything, their parents say, be careful. Well, St. Paul is no different when he addresses these elders from the church at Ephesus. He's not in Ephesus.

He's in Miletus, as we saw, 30 miles to the south. And he summons the elders from Ephesus to come down to meet him there. St. Paul had spent three years at Ephesus. Then he'd left to see some of the other churches that he planted in Greece and Macedonia.

And now he's sailing through the Aegean Sea back to Jerusalem. And he's taking some days out at the port of Miletus to speak with these elders from the Ephesian church.

He's expressed his personal fears about his own future, as we saw last week. He's anticipating persecution when he arrives in Jerusalem. And we know from later chapters of Acts, which we'll see in the next few weeks, that that does eventuate.

And we saw last week two key things about St. Paul that he commended. One is his godly example, his character. And the second was his charge to preach and teach the gospel in all its fullness.

[3 : 28] And now tonight we get to the crunch of this sermon or speech. The main imperative, if you like, the main command, and indeed the first one in the speech, is in verse 28.

Keep watch. Or in other translations, take heed. Or in other translations, take care. Be careful.

That's the crunch of this passage, really.

Take care. Take heed. Take heed of yourselves. And take heed over all the flock that's under your charge.

He's addressing leaders within a church. Firstly, take care of yourselves. That's not a dissimilar message from what we often hear in our day and age.

Self-care is often promoted. But usually self-care today means pampering yourself. Even being indulgent with yourself. Taking time out to do what you want.

[4 : 30] Being selfish or greedy, in essence. But Paul's command is to exercise spiritual self-care. For he recognises that unless a leader, a minister, an elder in the church of God exercises spiritual self-care, then he or she is unqualified.

To exercise spiritual care of others. How do you care for yourself spiritually? Paul doesn't tell us here. But through our reading of the New Testament, a few key essentials ought to be apparent. We care for ourselves spiritually when we have a discipline of prayer. When we have a diet of godliness. When we have regular workouts on the Bible.

When we exercise our faith to develop muscle tone. And when we run the Christian marathon in the company of other Christian runners.

Prayer, Bible reading, fellowship of God's people, obedience and faith. They're the things that are involved in self-care spiritually.

[5 : 42] All of them. Not just some or one. And invariably when a Christian falls away from Christian faith, those things are not being practised.

So St. Paul says, take heed and take care. Words that apply equally to all of us. Whether or not in a position of eldership or leadership in the church of God.

Take heed. Take care of yourself spiritually. It's your responsibility to be doing those things that I've talked about. But why the urgent warning here?

He's addressing leaders. Mature Christians. It would be tempting to think that such people would have developed such Christian muscle tone in their faith and godliness and so on.

That really such an exhortation is a little bit redundant. But no, ministry or leadership is not a snug retreat from dangers or perils or temptations or trials.

[6 : 48] How easy it is for a Christian minister or leader to play the game of Christian charades. To put on a pretense. Paul is saying in effect here to Christian leaders, never be a leader or minister in the church of God at the expense of being a disciple, a believer.

Someone who is growing personally and spiritually. Robert McShane, the great Scottish leader of the church, said, My personal holiness is my congregation's greatest need.

Words that St Paul would have said amen to. For those of you who are not Christian leaders, and I don't mean by that the clergy only, those who are church wardens or vestry members, those who lead a Bible study group or a youth group, those who exercise spiritual care as a link person here, those who exercise spiritual care over their family or other friends.

That's what leadership is in a broader sense. But for those of you who are not part of that, your job surely in the light of these words is to pray for and encourage Christian leadership and ministers to take care of themselves spiritually.

One of the great Christian leaders, I suspect of all time, was a man called Richard Baxter. He was a Puritan, an ordained Anglican minister in the 17th century.

[8 : 23] He served a curacy in Shropshire in a place called Bridge North and then was the vicar of Kidderminster for many years, during which time that town was basically thoroughly converted.

He wrote a book on this verse, verse 28 of chapter 20. You think my sermons are long? Read his book. This is just an abridged version. And he said, Take heed, therefore, to yourselves, that you be that which you persuade others to be, and that you believe that which you persuade them daily to believe, and that you have heartily entertained that same Christ and Spirit which you offer unto others.

For any of you in Christian leadership or ministry, those words are a faithful commentary on this passage. Take heed to yourselves.

Take care to yourselves, lest you be disqualified from taking care of others. St. Paul is addressing leaders.

So he doesn't stop at saying, Take heed to yourselves. Take heed also to the flock of God that is under your care, he goes on to say in verse 28. The flock is a common metaphor for the people of God in the Bible, common image for them.

[9 : 46] It's not that complimentary when you think about it. Sheep are pretty stupid. Both in Old Testament and New Testament, God's people are described as being like sheep or like a flock.

Psalms 100, Isaiah 40 onwards, Ezekiel 34, dozens of places. And therefore that image of the people of God being a flock carries with it the image of the leader being a shepherd of the flock.

King David, one of the great kings of course, was a shepherd before he was king. But when he was king, he didn't stop being a shepherd, only this time he was a shepherd of God's people, not of real sheep.

But not only kings, priests and other leaders were shepherds. But overall, they failed and failed badly. And in one of the most stinging rebukes against the leadership of God's Old Testament people, comes in Ezekiel 34, where there's been a whole sequence and series of failed shepherds, whom God holds accountable for the failure of God's people.

It's in that light then, of the failure of the Old Testament shepherds, that Jesus says, I am the good shepherd. And he characterises that qualification by saying, the one who lays down his life for the sheep.

[11:17] Not who lords it over, not who boasts in his power, not who feeds himself or seeks self-aggrandisement, but rather the care and the nourishment and the protection of the sheep.

But the model of the shepherd, leader of God's people, doesn't stop with Jesus. He entrusts it to the leaders of the New Testament people of God, the church.

So on that beach soon after the resurrection, he says three times in effect to St. Peter, feed my sheep or tend my flock. That doesn't stop with Peter or the first apostles either, because in Peter's first letter, he passes on the same charge to the leaders of other churches and groups, when he says, tend the flock of God that is in your charge, in 1 Peter 5.

In this passage, in Acts 20, we get the same idea. Although here, the leaders, the elders, are called overseers, not shepherds. And literally the word is what we end up with, the word bishop.

The bishop here though, is not a sort of purple-robed diocesan bureaucratic leader, but rather a local pastor.

[12:29] In New Testament terms, I'm the bishop in a sense of Holy Trinity. Warwick is the bishop of the Holy Trinity youth group. It's one reason why I like purple, I suppose.

It's why our bishops today will carry a staff, because it's meant to be a symbol of shepherd-type ministry. Even though too often they're caught up in bureaucracy. These leaders, these bishops or overseers, St. Paul says, have been made so by the Holy Spirit.

Which may be because the Holy Spirit has particularly gifted them for the task. Or it may be, or indeed as well, be that the Holy Spirit has directly called them somehow to be fit for this task.

Whatever is the case, the fundamental image of leadership of God's people in the Bible is of a shepherd. One who feeds and protects.

Not a manager, much as management is very common in Christian ministry today. Not a psychologist, although often Christian ministers are encouraged to be psychologists.

[13:41] Not a guru or a spiritual director, one to whom the flock turns for every answer. Not a strategist or a church growth expert or whatever.

The model of ministry in the New Testament that is essential and predominant is that the leader is a shepherd who cares for, tends, looks after, protects, feeds the flock.

And the best example of that, apart from Jesus, is St. Paul's, as we saw last week. The way you care for the flock as a shepherd is to teach the whole purpose of God.

Day and night, public and private, to Jew and Gentile. St. Paul has done that for three years in Ephesus. He's claimed, as we saw last week, that he's fulfilled his role.

And now he's passing on that task and responsibility to these elders. They are to do what he has done. He's the shepherd and he's exercised his shepherd ministry by teaching and preaching and pastoring.

[14:48] Now why is Paul so concerned about this here? Why is he so concerned to make sure the elders get it right? There are two reasons that follow in the rest of verse 28 and 29 onwards.

One is that the flock is valuable. The second is that it faces danger. If you've ever borrowed something from somebody of great value to them, no doubt you have a sense of nervousness while it's in your charge.

If you borrow somebody's car or cat or house or their jewels or all their wealth or something like that, I'm not sure that you feel all that comfortable sometimes.

Nervous perhaps that you're going to lose it or break it or have it stolen from you. My younger sister, when she was about three years old, had a very favourite stuffed animal.

Originally it was a cat, though by the time she was three it was hard to see that. All that was left, really, by the time she was three was a fairly dilapidated looking head that had lost its eyes and a

sort of bundle of rags that hung from it because the insides had all sort of fallen out.

[16:06] So there was a bit that used to be a body and a leg and a foot and an arm and so on, but really it was just a head and the rags that fell from beneath. To her, it was her favourite thing, her little safety blanket in a sense.

I remember going with my grandmother and my two sisters to the Carnegie Library when my sister was about three. She carried her little cat or its remnants at least with her. She played around in the books and we left without it.

That night she was in great distress. The next day we had to make a special trip to the library to rescue this little bundle of rag in effect. And then the next year I remember she was probably four I suppose then that we had gone to a public park and she'd left it in the park and so we'd gone back after dark to try and scour for it.

It was so important and valuable too and we found it where we should have guessed we would find it in the rubbish bin because somebody thought it was rubbish. My father had to take it home and very carefully disinfect it and cleanse it before she could start having it again.

Why must the Ephesian elders take such care over themselves and the church? Because it is precious to God.

[17:34] It is precious to God. It is God's church Paul says in verse 28. It's not Paul's church it's not the elders church it's not the church that belongs to the old timers nor the youth nor the archbishop or the pope or the patriarch or any other sort of figure it is God's church and it's precious to God.

It belongs to God and leadership of the church is a huge privilege and trust. God has entrusted what is precious to him to the leaders to the ministers to the elders the bishops the overseers or the shepherds.

It's like being given somebody's entire wealth to look after for a day. You'd be terrified of losing it. You must tremble as you take care of it guard it and keep it safe.

That's how the leaders and ministers of God's church today as well as then are to treat the church with the utmost care because it's God's and it's God's treasure.

It's precious to God. The value God places on the church is seen by the end of verse 28. It is the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own son.

[18:55] See, he didn't win it in a raffle. It wasn't left over at the end of the day like the bread we get from Brumbies that nobody wants. God paid for it. He paid for it with the blood of his own son.

He paid for the church. He obtained the church at the highest price that he could pay. The blood of his own son. As much as God had to pay.

A costly price indeed. Precious blood indeed. The church is precious to God because Jesus the good shepherd laid down his life for it.

That's the value that God attaches to the church. And you see, it's so easy to despise it or to belittle the church, to take it lightly, to take it carelessly, to sit easily with our involvement with it or our prayers for it, to treat it with disdain or scorn or even ridicule or contempt.

To treat it as though it's really just rubbish and stupid. Like a destroyed, stuffed animal. But to God, it is precious above anything else.

[20:16] And that ought to be the eyes with which we look upon it as well, whether leaders or not. Take heed, Paul says, take care.

Because the church that looks so past it, so ineffectual, so weak, so despised, is God's greatest treasure.

And he paid for it with virtually everything that he had. So Christian ministry, you see, is a great privilege, but a privilege that carries a huge responsibility.

Christian leaders are not only responsible and accountable for their own lives, but also for the lives of the church that is entrusted to their care. St. Paul, as we saw last week, had fulfilled his stewardship.

He discharged his duty faithfully and honorably. And now it is the elders' turn. John Calvin, the great reformer, says, it is a monstrous crime if by our idleness, that is the idleness of Christian leaders and ministers, if by our idleness the death of Christ becomes worthless and also the fruit of it is destroyed or perishes.

[21:44] A monstrous crime, he says. The church is so precious to God that Christian leaders and ministers cannot afford to be idle in their care of it.

Take heed, take care, is what Calvin's saying, what St. Paul is saying. There is no higher calling. There is no greater responsibility either.

Turning again to Richard Baxter in the 17th century. Let us hear these arguments of Christ whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless.

And he now quotes as though Christ were speaking. Did I die for these souls and wilt thou not look after them?

Were they worth my blood and are they not worth thy labour? Did I come down from heaven to earth to seek and to save that which was lost and wilt thou not go to the next door or street or village to seek them?

[22 : 53] How small is thy condescension and labour compared to mine? I debased myself to this but it is thy honour to be so employed.

Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation and was I willing to make thee a fellow worker with me and wilt thou refuse to do that little which lieth upon thy hands?

and then to the leaders to whom he writes every time we look upon our congregations let us believingly remember that they are the purchase of Christ's blood and therefore should be regarded by us with the deepest interest and the most tender affection.

if you are in leadership or aspire to be so there is no higher calling yet no greater responsibility either.

Now usually when somebody says to you take care or be careful it's because they perceive there may be some sort of danger whether it's driving on holidays or climbing ladders or just anything that a teenager does.

[24 : 21] Well so too St. Paul for the Ephesian church. The second reason why he's so concerned to express to them take care is because there is danger for the church.

Not only is the church valuable but it's in a dangerous position because he goes on to say in verses 29 to 31 that savage wolves will come in. False teachers heretics the immoral will come in from outside into your church as if to destroy it.

And then even from within your own group in verse 30 there will come some who will distort the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. So he says be alert and then commends his own example remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. the way to protect the flock from danger is correct teaching making sure that the flock knows the Bible knows the gospel and holds fast to it.

Paul's example is an example of vigilant teaching of warning and encouragement of rebuke and admonishment of warm comfort and salvation.

[25 : 34] Sadly it seems that Paul's fears for the church in Ephesus were realised. He expresses grave concern for them when he writes to Timothy in 1 and 2 Timothy and the book of Revelation chapter 2 makes it clear that the Ephesian church has gone astray.

Well given the value of the church and given the danger that it faces who is equal to this task? Who is equal to be an elder or overseer or bishop in the church of God?

Such a serious task, such a dangerous task, such a precious trust given to leaders. It's easy to be reluctant. It's easy to think it's beyond me like Moses did.

It's easy to keep your hand down when God calls out for people to exercise such leadership and ministry. That's why Paul commits them to God in the words of verse 32.

And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace. A message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified.

[26 : 47] It is only God and his grace that can sustain Christian ministry to the end. It is only God and his grace that can sustain Christian living to the end.

It is only God and his grace that can give perseverance to receive the inheritance promised for Christian people. Nobody is equal to the task you see. Nobody has the ability and the gifts and the experience and the expertise to fulfill all of these things.

But it is God and God's grace alone that empowers for perseverance to the end. He does it through the message of his word of grace.

The very thing that Paul clung to and proclaimed as we saw last week. Wherever Christians and Christian ministers deviate from the word of God, from the message of his grace, then the flock is vulnerable to destruction.

Indeed, it is devoured, destroyed, and dies. The means by which God keeps his flock safe is the message of his word of grace, which equips and empowers and sustains.

[28 : 03] So take heed, take care, Paul says, to yourselves and to the church if you are a leader in the church. Take heed, take care, because there remain dangerous today.

Savage wolves are not extinct. They live in our own midst. Take heed, take care, Paul says, because the blood of Christ means the church is worth it.

Take heed, take care, because the blood of Christ means the church is worth it. Give me love. Give her love.