

Shepherding God's Flock

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[0 : 00] Okay, we all know that when it comes to leaders, there are different types in the world, right? And one distinction we often make is that of a pioneer or entrepreneur versus the builder.

Pioneers are those who, you know, we need to do startups, creatives. They take initiative, they're nimble, you know, they see possibilities when none exist.

The builder is the one that comes afterwards to bring order to the chaos. He or she is steady, methodical, is there to, you know, for the long haul to get things stable and going smoothly.

Well, we resume our series in Exodus where the last time we left Paul on his missionary journeys. And there we saw Paul as a bit of a pioneer going around Asia and Greece, preaching the gospel, making converts, starting up churches.

The common impression of Paul that we have is that of a pioneer missionary and church planter. But, you know, there's another side to Paul, isn't there, which we now see he was capable as a builder as well.

[1 : 12] In fact, he had already been doing this in Corinth and Ephesus, having stayed in those places when he first planted the churches for months and even years to build up the church.

Well, this work now continues in chapter 20. And in verses 1 to 16, I describe this as the what of shepherding.

So, point one of your outlines. The role of the shepherd is to build up the church. Hence, Paul instructs the elders in verse 28 later on the slide here to be shepherds of the church of God.

And if you notice the sentence beforehand, he also says, keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. And of course, as I just said in verse 17, this speech is given to the elders of Ephesus, whom he summons to Miletus.

So, whether the word is shepherd, overseer, or elder, they all describe the role of what we call pastors today. Now, verses 1 to 6 appear firstly like a travel log, travel itinerary.

[2 : 18] And you might be wondering where these places are. So, here's a map of them on the next slide. A bit small, but hopefully you can pick it up. And at the end of chapter 19, we saw Paul in Ephesus.

That's a little yellow shaded word. That's where Ephesus is. But now, at the start of chapter 20, he's making his way through Greece, out along the west, along the solid line, greenish line.

And if you look at verse 3, he now arrives at Corinth. And he had actually had plans to sail directly to Syria, where Antioch, all the way to the east, is, and then on to Jerusalem.

But he decides to go by land, because we read that there was opposition from the Jews. Now, we don't know what this opposition, well, how it was occurring.

It could be that maybe these Jews were on the same ship that he was planning to take, and so he didn't want to get on board. Or maybe they were already waiting for him in Syria, and so he wanted to delay his arrival in Jerusalem.

[3 : 23] Instead, what he does then is retrace his steps, and this time you see the dotted line going back roughly along the same route as the solid line.

And in verse 6, he arrives at Troas, where he stays for seven days. Troas, you will see, is in the northeast of the Aegean Sea. Now, why is Luke giving us this account?

Well, firstly, although we don't find out until Acts 24, verse 17, Paul was actually making stops along the way to take up a collection for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

And we read more about that if you care to look at 2 Corinthians. And so it's likely that the names that are mentioned in verse 4, which Jillian pronounced really well, and I won't try to, these people were representatives, I think, of those churches.

And they were accompanying Paul as he was taking their gifts back to Jerusalem. So this is one aspect of Paul's work in shepherding, to build up the church by bringing a gift to Jerusalem.

[4 : 30] But he was also building up not just the church in Jerusalem, but the giving churches as well, as he was stopping along the way, because he was growing them in generosity and service.

But secondly, I believe that Paul was revisiting these churches, as we will read in verse 2, because he wanted to speak many words of encouragement to them. To speak words of encouragement is to strengthen them in faith through teaching and preaching, even in the midst of opposition. And so on the slide there you read, he traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people. Now, just how many words he spoke, I think, can be seen in the next episode in Troas, verse 7.

For we read that on the first day of the week, we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people, and because he intended to leave the next day, he kept on talking until midnight.

Now, whether this was a monologue, like he was just preaching me, like what I'm doing now, or it was actually more of a dialogue with people interacting like a Bible study, we don't really know.

[5 : 40] All we know is that Paul couldn't stop talking. Now, you can see why, though, because he was about to depart next day, and so there was a sense of urgency for him to impart as much as he could before he left.

But unfortunately, what that led to was the accident in verse 8. And so we read, there were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in the window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on and on.

When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. So I think what's happened is that there was probably a built-up of carbon dioxide, maybe.

Eutychus, wanting some fresh air, went to the window and sat on it. But because Paul kept talking and talking, he fell asleep, lost his balance, and fell three stories to his death.

Now, I don't want to be critical of Paul's preaching here. You know, I've seen people fall asleep with my sermons, only after ten minutes. May happen again here tonight, I don't know.

[6 : 52] But nevertheless, like Jesus in his own ministry, Paul was able to raise Eutychus from the dead. And then, went upstairs, broke bread, and kept talking again.

Until daybreak. So if you think about it, it's at least six hours, because midnight to daybreak, six hours. But probably longer. Probably nine, ten hours at least.

So this story, I don't think is, you know, so much as to teach us about the miracle of Paul being able to raise Eutychus from the dead, maybe. That's a side point.

Nor is it to instruct me to preach well, although that is also a good thing to do. But I think this passage is here to show just how many words of encouragement Paul was intent on speaking. Because teaching and preaching was a key aspect of his shepherding. That was actually the main reason or purpose for him to revisit the churches.

[7 : 58] Which I think brings us to the how of shepherding. Because from Troas, Paul now makes his way to Miletus. And again, if you look on the map, you can trace where he's going.

Miletus is just south of Ephesus. But we find out in verse 16 that he's trying to avoid Ephesus because he was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost.

And by my calculation, that was about a month away. So what he does is he summons the elders to come to him instead. And what we have from verse 18 onwards is his farewell speech to them.

Wherein Paul outlines his instruction to them. Telling them how they are to continue as shepherds of the church and to do what he has been doing for them.

But first, the speech begins with a testimony of how Paul has lived among them. And he says that in order to have him as a model for what they are to do, to follow him.

[9 : 01] And so verse 18, he says, You know how I lived the whole time I was with you from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents.

So Paul here is saying that he walks the talk. He practices what he preaches. And from the beginning, he's been transparent with them. Serving with great humility, with tears in the midst of hardship.

And so the role of a pastor is not a glamorous one. It's often filled with hardship. It certainly calls for setting aside our own personal glory for the sake of the church.

And then what happens in verse 20 is that he goes into more detail, telling them how he has gone about his work of shepherding. And so as to encourage them to do the same.

Now I'm going to read it in full because I want you to pick up really the pathos and the emotion of just what he's saying to them. And so he says, You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but I've taught you publicly and from house to house.

[10:17] I've declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. And now, compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.

I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me.

My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace. Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.

Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Be shepherds of the good church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

[11:23] Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard. Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you, night and day with tears.

Now I commit to you, or rather I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus himself.

It is more blessed to give than to receive. It's actually a very moving speech, isn't it? And you can hear, can't you, the deep love that Paul has for the people, for the elders, and how he sacrificed for them.

He's poured out his heart and soul into their lives. What he says here is of great importance because things that matter are at stake, things to do with life and death.

[12:45] The flock is vulnerable and needs protection. And Paul proclaims to them what he calls in verse 27, the whole will of God. He's not just saying things they like to hear, but what they need to hear, even if it's not pleasant.

Nothing was being withheld from them. And the first thing actually that he says and preaches, the message that he gives to them, is to really call all of them, Jews and Greeks alike, to repentance and faith in Jesus, verse 20 and 21.

God's church has been bought by his blood, verse 28. And so the first thing any individual sheep must do is put their faith in Jesus. And so important was this message that Paul preached it publicly, that is in the synagogues, in the public squares, but then also privately, sort of house to house.

And this message is still just as important today. And if you're hearing this for the first time, then know that it is only when we recognize our pride and sin and turn to God in repentance and put our faith in Jesus that we can be saved.

We can't save ourselves. Only trusting in his son and depending on his death can do that for us. Now there are many other things that Paul says he's unsure of in his life.

[14:12] For instance, he doesn't know what will happen to him when he gets to Jerusalem. All he knows is that the Spirit tells him that he will be suffering. But what he does know, this thing of singular importance to him, is that of completing the task that Jesus has set for him, of testifying to God's grace.

He has given up everything to finish this task, to complete the race. But as Paul says, this is good news for all. Great news.

God's abundant love has been poured out on them and us. And even as Jesus died on the cross and the blood was being poured out from his body, that very act was evidence of God's grace

poured out on his flock.

And so if you ever doubt God's love for you or his favor, you need look no further than what he has done through his son on the cross for us.

That is evidence of God's grace poured out for us. And yet, even though it's great news, good news, it is being obscured by others.

[15:26] They are distorting this truth, Paul says, to draw away disciples. Now what exactly this is, we will see in the next couple of weeks. But these are not just people outside the church, but inside as well.

There are savage wolves among them, among their number. The enemies, as it were, are within the gates. And it's reminiscent, isn't it, of the picture in Ezekiel chapter 34, which Tiff read, where the priests, who are meant to be God's appointed shepherds to guard the sheep of Israel, turn out to be wolves themselves.

They neglect the sheep, even devour them. And all of this done within the sheepfold, where the sheep are, instead of feeling protected, are defenseless to them.

Now I happen to have first-hand experience of what it's like when a fox happened to get into the chicken coop at home. Not a pleasant sight. And all I can say, it was a blessing to clean up the carnage in the dark.

And that's exactly what the church is like, isn't it? When false teaching takes hold. The impact on the flock is devastating. Because many are drawn away from the faith, while at the same time not knowing it, not realizing it, thinking that actually they're doing a good thing by believing in the things that are being told to them.

[16:59] All of it with eternal consequences. And so the job of the pastor then is to be watchful. First, over themselves, verse 28, because they need to guard their own hearts and lives, but then so that they can in turn watch over the flock.

And this isn't just a one-off, tick the box, get it done, and then forget about it thing. Rather, it's an ongoing act of vigilance. And that's why Paul says, he never stopped warning each of them, verse 31, for three years, night and day, with tears.

I think Paul must have been so heartbroken to see some of them turning away from the faith, or worse, turning into wolves themselves. It probably felt to him like a never-ending battle, which I think it is.

You know, the truth is, I think false teaching is a bit like weeds. You know, I don't know whether you've done weeding. I hate it. But, weeds never die, do they? I mean, they do die, but then they keep popping up again.

And no matter how often you root it out, they come back. And so it is with false teaching and heresies. Often, they are the same old ones, just sprouting up in another form.

[18:24] You know, the devil has the same old lies, but he's great at cultural contextualization. He's actually a great missionary in that sense, in a bad way, but in that sense, a great, very effective missionary.

Because he's able to take what's in that culture, or what is sort of popular in that generation, and use it to tell us the lies that we want to hear.

But it's the same old lies. It's happened over and over again. And so are his false prophets. Very effective. But even though the danger is there, I don't want us to think that there is no hope, or that for those of us who do the work, that it is all in vain, because it isn't.

We'll get to that in the last point of the outline. But before we do that, I want to ask the question, just pause to consider for a moment, who does this passage apply to today?

Who are the shepherds in our midst? Now here's, you're just probably looking at me and going, you are. Which is right, yes. That's what I've been charged to do. Here's part of, on the screen, here's part of the prayer book, for the ordination of priests.

[19:42] And the charge that was read out to us was, remember that you will be called to give account before Jesus Christ, if it should come about that the church, or any of its members, is hurt or hindered as a result of your negligence.

You know the greatness of the fault, and the judgment that will follow. Therefore, apply yourself with diligence and care. Fashion your life and ministry in accordance with Christ's example. And then one of the promises of vows we have to make in response to that is this.

Will you be ready, both in your public and private ministry, to oppose and set aside teaching that is contrary to God's word? Well, you may be glad to know that I answered yes.

But as a result of that, please pray for me, which I know many of you do constantly. Pray for me, pray for Andrew, for Jeff, for Peter, Ricky, Michelle, and Steph, all those who are pastors, because this is a heavy duty that is put on us.

It's not a light matter that we can just take for granted. And in particular for me, that means I have a duty to guard the pulpit.

[20 : 54] Next Sunday, we're going to have King Lee preaching here as a trainee preacher. And so we spend hours in preparation together. And even though we need to be gracious to him next week, please, all right, be kind and gentle because he's still training.

But that is not to be at the expense of truth either, is it? So that's why I've asked King Lee and his promise to send a copy of the script to me for review before he preaches.

So King Lee, please do. But it's important, isn't it, that when we sit under God's word, the people who stand up here have to be faithful to that word, isn't it?

We also then have to guard carefully those we appoint as Bible study leaders as well, don't we? Because that's the sort of teaching that occurs house to house, as Paul was doing.

It's important that they are accountable to pastors in the church. And by Bible study leaders, I mean, HDY leaders as well, and kids leaders, right? Because they're all teaching the Bible.

[22 : 02] And so even though they're not pastors, you're not pastors, you've been delegated to watch over mini flocks, haven't you? So please watch over yourselves.

Don't turn into wolves, witting or unwitting, and remember to serve the Lord with great humility. But you know, I think this passage is also for everyone, because nowadays, the wolves don't just turn up at the front door of our church, do they?

Or sit beside you on Sundays. No, they can sit on the bookshelves of Kurong Bookstore, or in your phone, because I know many of you have podcasts of famous preachers that you want to listen to, or over the internet on YouTube.

In this day and age, the reality that it's actually impossible as pastors to prevent who comes through the gates of the fold. The sheep, you sheep, are exposed to the big, wide world, through the internet, through media.

And so by all means, please, when you hear something, or read something that you're not sure about, or you hear of, you know, you tune into a preacher that you don't know the character of, please come and speak to me, or to Jeff, or to Steph, if you're unsure about what you're listening to.

[23 : 31] But at the end of the day as well, I think there is really no substitute in you knowing God's word yourself, and being grounded in the truth. As Paul says in verse 32, I commit you to God, but not only God, is it?

Commit you to the word of his grace as well, which can build you up. Because it's the word of grace, which is in the Bible, that's the means by which God will build us up, but also protect us against distortions of the truth.

And incidentally, while I'm at it, that's why it's also important that we're involved in the local church, to be turning up. You're not coming here for a social gathering each Sunday, even though you can be social when you gather.

But really, the benefit when we come together, is we're sharpening each other. We've got this means where we can be talking about the Bible, encouraging each other, to stand firm in the truth. Now all of this is hard work in some sense. It takes consistency, doesn't it? But as I said earlier, it is all worth it, because we finally come to the why of Paul's shepherding. Paul gives us three reasons why.

[24 : 46] First, because, as Paul has already mentioned, this is a task that the Lord and His Spirit has assigned to each of us. God has said in Ezekiel that because of the false prophets, He Himself will come to shepherd us.

And of course, He did that by sending Jesus Himself as our chief and great shepherd, who laid down His life for us. So if Jesus did not just give us true teaching, He also laid down His life to protect us, by the blood, by His own blood.

But then, those of us who are so blessed, well, we need to also, in turn, do the same and help others with the truth. And so second, we shepherd the flock because the reward is great, not just for the shepherds, but for the sheep as well.

As Paul keeps going on in verse 32, he says that if we persevere, we will be given an inheritance with those who are sanctified. All this hard work, all this diligence will pay off when we come into God's glory.

Conversely, if we miss out, imagine that the inheritance is within our grasp, but we miss out on that just because we decide to follow the wolves.

[26 : 04] That would be such a shame, wouldn't it? And lastly, Paul says this is all worth it because just as it was true for our Savior Jesus, our Great Shepherd, it is true for us that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

And here, all I can say is share from my personal experience that there is such a sense of joy and satisfaction when you share the good news of Jesus and someone says, yes, I believe.

Or when you teach the Word of God and it is received by faith and someone says, yes, I want to follow Jesus and I want to stand firm in my faith.

When people are strengthened in the Lord, whatever their situation, it brings such blessing to me. even though, you know, there is nothing for me to gain from it, really, except maybe to have more brothers and sisters in heaven, which is gain in itself.

You know, many of you, I think, get a bit of a buzz when you, you know, particularly those of you who have gift giving as your love language, not mine, but anyway. But for those of you who do, and even those of you who don't, there is such a buzz, isn't it, when you give someone a gift, even a small material gift, well, if that's the sense of satisfaction we get with that simple thing, how much more when what we're offering to others is the gift of a spiritual and eternal treasure?

[27 : 38] Imagine how much more satisfaction, how much more joy, what buzz you will get when we keep doing that. Giving instead of receiving. So, let me end then by encouraging all of us to just join in this work of shepherding.

Whatever your role is, you may not be called to be a full-time pastor, but even if you aren't and all you're involved in is helping one or two sheep in the flock, walking beside them, encouraging them, whatever it may be, that would be such a worthwhile thing that you could put yourself, put your task, your mind to.

The wolves may be circling, but we have God's word of grace that is able to build us up and give us that great inheritance for all who are sanctified by the Lord.

Let's pray that God will help us to do that. Father, thank you for giving us the Lord Jesus as our great shepherd. He's the one that matters.

Help us then to watch ourselves and those whom we shepherd. For those of us who are pastors, protect us and help us to live godly lives and be faithful in teaching and living out your word.

[28 : 59] help us not to be afraid to proclaim the whole will of God to the flock and keep us all safe until the day when we inherit your glory.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.