

Challenging the Shepherds of God's People

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[0 : 0 0] Please be seated. I'd like to open again the Bibles to page 905. We're continuing a sermon series that we began at Easter from the Acts of the Apostles and we're up to chapter 20 from the second Bible reading today and let's pray.

Speak, O Lord, to us, we pray from your word. Give us not only understanding but hearts willing and eager to obey and serve you, to live under your word for the glory of your son.

Amen. My life has been punctuated by emotional farewells. I remember when we used to have family holidays and we would leave the place of our holiday saying farewell to whatever that location was and I and my two sisters would sing in the back of the car, The Carnival is Over, the old Seekers song.

And then would you believe that when I finished my years of university interstate and came back to Melbourne, the very evening I was leaving and friends were driving me to Central Station in Sydney, as we got in the car to drive out, having said goodbye to friends with tears in my eyes, the radio was on and the song that just began was The Carnival is Over.

Well, I was a wreck for the rest of the drive to Sydney Central Station. I remember when I left England to come back to Australia, to come here, I couldn't finish my speech properly because of tears.

[1 : 3 6] And let me tell you, I'm dreading November the 8th and I'm going to find every reason I can not to be here and to write or tape a sermon in advance or something like that.

Well, farewells are often very emotional and Paul in his farewell to the Ephesian elders in this chapter of Acts 20 is no exception to that. Strictly, he's not in Ephesus.

He's in a place called Miletus, which is a little bit south of Ephesus. In those days, it was a port. These days, it's been silted up. It's a little bit inland. And he has left Ephesus, as we saw last week, the riot in Ephesus.

He's gone back into northern Greece, Macedonia and Greece for ministry. And now he's sailing for Jerusalem. But he stops at Miletus and he sends a messenger to call the elders from the church in Ephesus down to Miletus where he is on the ship.

And then he speaks these words, a farewell speech. It's not, in one sense, strictly a sermon and it's certainly not a sermon for unbelievers, as we see many records of that sort of preaching in the Acts, but really a pastoral and emotional farewell speech to the elders of the church in Ephesus that Paul had founded and that he'd been there for close to three years, between two and three years, it seems.

[2 : 5 7] So what does he say in this farewell speech? The first of perhaps four things that I'll pick up. The first theme is that he commends his own example to them.

That's not an easy thing to do. But for Paul, this is not an idle boast. He says in verse 18, you yourselves know how I lived among you.

And then in verse 34, you know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands. So what he says about his example in this speech is something that they know.

He's not making it up. He's not exaggerating. He's not boasting. He's speaking the truth of the example that he's set for them. And it's been a consistent example.

He says in verse 18, you know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia. Asia for Paul is different from Asia for me.

[4 : 02] Asia for Paul means Western Turkey, Asia Minor as it was called. And Ephesus was the main city of the centre of that province of the Roman Empire, Asia Minor.

Paul had been there, as I say, for between two and three years. And he's saying that from the very first day, my example in your midst has been consistent.

What has been that example? He says in the next verse 19, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears. Serving the Lord, not himself.

Serving the Lord, not above all people. Serving the Lord with all humility, not with pride, not parading his ego, not trying to accumulate plaudits, but with humility.

He's brought them the gospel that they did not know and which this group has embraced with faith. And he could have done so with some pride.

[5 : 12] I've got the gospel for you. But he's done so humbly because he knows the gospel is of grace, as he'll say later on. His discovery of the gospel was by God's grace, opening it to him on the road to Damascus.

He's come to them with tears. Tears reflecting, I think, a personal commitment and love for these people. He hasn't come as a sort of cold-hearted salesman trying to thump home the sale to embrace the gospel and become a Christian.

He's come with love for people, a deep and tender and affectionate love. Often Paul is regarded as sort of a hard man of the New Testament.

But actually he's very affectionate, tender and loving. And this is only just one of many places where we see that side of him. He's come to them enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews, setting them an example of perseverance and endurance.

I'm sure many of us will know people who have become Christians but quickly dry up or drift away. Paul endured. He set them an example of endurance and endurance through much hostility, not least the riot that we saw when Wayne preached last Sunday.

[6 : 39] And then later on in this speech, in verse 33, he comes back to his example when he says, I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing.

Paul, it seems, was probably quite poor. He worked with his own hands, he says that in the next verse, 34, to support himself and his companions, making tents, it seems.

It was a fairly basic subsistence type living. But he didn't covet, he didn't manipulate people, he didn't try to gain out of them their wealth or goods or gifts either.

something that Paul was consistent in other places in. He says the same sort of thing to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians. Paul's example has been an example of generosity and service, not of greed and pride.

Now, Paul is not boasting when he gives this example. He's not trying to seek their praise or anything like that. He knows the obligation on Christian leaders and pastors to set a godly example.

[7 : 48] First and foremost, in a way. And he has done so. And for those who would seek to be in Christian ministry or mission service or are, whether that's in the leading of a small group or the leading of a church, living an exemplary life is an obligation, a requirement and a very high standard indeed.

Of course, if the godly example is not there, then the preaching of God's word, no matter how good it is technically, will fall inevitably on deaf ears.

Murray McShane, the Scottish pastor and preacher, said, my personal holiness is my church's greatest need. I rarely hear that sort of emphasis, I think, in Christian ministry circles these days.

Certainly for me, the greatest struggle in ministry over the last 13 and a bit years here has been maintaining or striving to attain a godly standard of character and example, consistently, under pressure, through the ups and downs.

Paul's second theme is what he's done. The first theme is what he's been in a sense. Secondly, what he's done.

[9 : 11] And there's no doubt, not only from this passage but from the record of Paul's ministry and acts in general and from his letters, what Paul is on about is preaching the gospel.

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel, he says in another place. And so what we found in chapter 19 of Acts, the previous chapter when he comes to Ephesus is his preaching and teaching day by day in the synagogue and hall and so on.

And so in this letter of testimony about his ministry, he reminds them of the emphasis of his activity. He says in verse 20, I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, proclaiming and teaching the prime activity of a pastor of the church of God.

Notice how he has done that publicly in meetings, in halls, in the open air perhaps, but also house to house, one-on-one with people or with their household, teaching the gospel, explaining its application, etc.

In verse 21, I testified to both Jew and Greek. So he didn't limit his ministry, though he was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles, but to Jew and Greek.

[10 : 36] And he testified, he bore witness to them. Again, it's about the proclamation, the speaking of the gospel. And that was about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

Repentance and faith being in a sense the bifocal summary of gospel response. And now as a captive to the Spirit, I'm on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.

And he goes on in verse 24 then to say, I don't count my life of any value to myself. If only I may finish my course in the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the good news of God's grace.

Again, that idea of testifying. Second time that word occurs. And here it's, the content is the good news of God's grace. In verse 25, the same theme continues.

I know that none of you among whom I've gone about proclaiming the kingdom. Here he summarizes it in a different way, but again the verb proclaim as he used it earlier on in verse 20.

[11 : 41] This time the content is summarized by the word the kingdom. And then in verse 26, I declare to you this day that I'm not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

See all those verbs of speaking, proclaim twice, testify twice, teaching, declaring. Paul has used every opportunity for speaking, teaching, proclaiming, preaching the word of God over the time that he was in Ephesus.

And the content of what he preaches, he called the message, it's about repentance and faith in verse 21, it's the good news of God's grace in verse 24, it's about the kingdom in verse 25, the whole purpose of God in verse 27.

It's not just a simple message, but he's taught them fully and thoroughly. There's quite a sense of rigor in what Paul is saying that he's done in Ephesus. He's taught publicly, privately, Jew and Gentile, the whole counsel of God day and night, systematically, thoroughly, energetically over a long period of time.

Like his example of godly character, his example of preaching, teaching, proclaiming, testifying the word of God has likewise been thorough. Twice he says, I did not shrink from this.

[13 : 09] Verse 20 and 27, I did not shrink. The reason for saying that is because preaching a gospel is not easy. It falls often on deaf ears and often, as we saw last week in chapter 19, on hostile ears.

That's because some parts of the gospel are not easy. They're not particularly palatable. People don't like being told that they're sinners who are unable to save themselves.

But that's the gospel. It's glorious because God saves us and we don't have to. But it's something that people find offensive at times.

They rebel against, reject. They may turn away just simply deaf to it. But as with the riot, sometimes hostile. And there is temptation.

Paul reflects this later on when to Timothy then pastoring the same church in Ephesus, he urges him to hold fast to the truth of the gospel and not to fall into the ways of false teachers who flatter people speaking what itching ears long to hear.

[14 : 26] See, it's very tempting to distort, to change, to water down, to soften the gospel. And ironically, every attempt to do that diminishes its glory.

Two themes so far. Paul's example and Paul's preaching. It's a high standard. I'm not sure that I could quite echo the same words of Paul in commending an example that I know has fallen flat and failed many times.

There is a sense in which Paul's testimony about preaching the whole counsel of God is something that I certainly sought to do in years here.

In Paul's testimony about his ministry, he sets before us two strong and important things for which we should be praying for the next vicar of this church.

A person of godly character, a person who will not shrink from preaching the gospel. The story is told of a man who preached so well yet lived so badly that when he was in the pulpit nobody wanted him to get out but when he was out of the pulpit they knew he ought never get in but not Paul the apostle a person who lived a life of integrity outside the pulpit and in the pulpit preached without shrinking back the whole counsel of God.

[16 : 02] A third thing about this speech is that at its heart is a command to the Ephesian elders. It's not simply Paul's reminiscence or self-testimony of what he's done although in large part that is in the two themes that I've said.

Verse 28 a famous verse one of my favourite books was a book written entirely on this one verse keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock keep watch over yourselves and keep watch over all the flock two things in effect both of them keep watch take care be alert is the sense of that verb fairly strong idea he's saying to the elders of the church in Ephesus be careful take heed to yourselves and to the flock to yourselves not to look after yourself to pamper yourself or indulge yourself that's not the sense of what Paul is saying when he says take heed to yourselves he's speaking spiritually he's saying make sure that you sustain your own spiritual life make sure that you watch and guard your own spiritual life see it's actually easy to be in church leadership and to be a minister and preacher of God's word and yet our own Christian life somehow dries up that we don't actually look after ourselves spiritually enough and I've known over the years of ministry here how important it is more and more so as I go on in ministry to guard my own

Bible reading and prayers and Christian fellowship that I'm being fed by God's word and not simply being a deliverer of God's word and that's in effect what he's saying here make sure that ministers and elders are feeding themselves spiritually otherwise they'll never feed the flock and that I think is why it's in that order take heed to yourselves and to the flock there's a sense in which taking heed to yourselves is in part for the purpose of the flock so that you can take care of them that you look after them as verse 28 goes on to say flock is not necessarily a complimentary idea to suggest that we are like sheep but it's a common one in the Bible it's important one because it reflects our own helplessness and in a sense our stupidity without the care and the grace of God a shepherd was to feed and protect to guard and watch to tend to nourish and for

Paul here it's a spiritual metaphor and as in the Old Testament background from which you think he's deriving this idea it's about caring for a flock by speaking the words of truth in fact the very things Paul's commended of himself are what makes a good shepherd in effect now why does Paul express this concern here take heed to yourselves and to the flock two things I think one is the value of the flock they're not just silly sheep they're not dispensable they're valuable he says about the flock in verse 28 it's the Holy Spirit who's made you overseers to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own son Paul is saying the church is valuable the flock of God is valuable and it's

God's and the value is found in what God has paid for it if you're like me when you borrow somebody's car you drive much more carefully than if you drive your own you're more anxious about scratching it or bumping something or getting it wrong because it's somebody else's and you want to treat their possessions with great respect I know somebody entrusts something to me it may not be valuable in itself but may be precious to them you become a little more anxious about looking after it and guarding it and checking that it's in your pocket or in the right place safe and secure maybe treating it better than your own possessions in effect that's behind what Paul is saying here the church at Ephesus that he planted that he first evangelized and pastored over the three year period it's not his church doesn't belong to him doesn't even belong to the elders it's

[20 : 45] God's and the value that God places on his church in Ephesus in Doncaster is that he paid the price of blood his son's blood for God's flock that's a high value it's a high value that God places on us as a church as a congregation we sometimes forget that when we sit loosely or despise or criticize or undermine the flock of God in some way it's God's and he thinks very highly of it it's so valuable that his son's blood was shed for it when we pray for a minister after God's own heart a shepherd after God's own heart we're praying for someone who will esteem and value God's flock the second reason I think Paul is so concerned in this verse it's not just because of the value of the flock but because of the danger whenever you hear the command take care or be careful it's because the person issuing the command thinks there is some danger so how often do parents say to their children be careful when you're driving if driving were perfectly safe we would never say be careful my reaction sometimes is say oh no I'm going to drive recklessly but when we issue that command be careful it's because of danger and so it is here

Paul goes on to say in verse 29 30 I know that after I have gone savage wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them so be alert for I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears Paul has taught rigorously he's warned them he's taught them the truth but in a way that alerts them to error to guard them against false teachers heresy and immorality and Paul sees a danger here because false teachers abound and they still do 2,000 years later in pulpits around the world people who preach a message other than the gospel of Jesus Christ that's why it's so important to be praying for a new minister to pray for the incumbency committee in the search that's underway sadly Paul's fears were realised in

Ephesus when you read 1 and 2 Timothy when you read Revelation chapter 2 we realise that false teachers did come up like wolves even from amidst the congregation to lead them astray to lead them away from the gospel that Paul taught so pray now I don't have a particular fear that savage wolves are about to walk in November 9th or something like that but it is something we ought to be praying for well lastly Paul's responsibility for the church in Ephesus is over he's discharged his duty he said in verse 25 now I know that none of you among whom I've gone about proclaiming the kingdom will ever see my face again therefore I declare to you this day that I'm not responsible for the blood of any of you for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God in the background

Paul has an Old Testament idea I think the prophet Ezekiel was called to be a watchman for the people of God he was to warn them when danger came and if he warned them but they didn't heed the warning their blood would not be on his head but if he didn't heed the warning and tell them the warning then their blood would be on their head even if they're personally guilty for their sins Paul is saying I've warned you I've taught you the whole counsel of God you know the truth of the gospel you know what I've taught you for maturity for Christian responsibility I've discharged my duty now if you don't heed that warning now if you go after false teachers your blood is not on my head is what he's saying and from November the 8th this will be the same for me for this church my responsibility will be completed as Paul speaks he faces a very uncertain future he says to them in verse 22 and now as a captive to the spirit I'm on my way to

Jerusalem not knowing what will happen to me there except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me but I do not count my life of any value to myself if only I may finish my course in the ministry that I've received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the good news of God's grace Paul expects the worst in Jerusalem and if you read to the end of the Acts of the Apostles you see that his fears were realised imprisoned accused unjustly and ending up in Rome under house arrest and tradition has it that sometime later in the reign of Nero the Emperor put to death for his Christian faith I must say I have no such fears of me going to Asia but who knows what will happen Paul was infamous of course the Jewish leaders hated him and the riot that we saw last week was just a sample of that in a way but notice how Paul describes his future he says that in every city he comes to the Holy Spirit testifies of imprisonment and persecutions you may just take that and say well maybe the Holy Spirit is warning you not to go to

[27 : 11] Jerusalem but he does say as well in verse 22 he's going to Jerusalem captive to the Spirit that is because God's Spirit is leading him there he knows that it will be bad in a sense physically for him imprisonment and persecution but he doesn't stop because it's where God's leading him where God's Spirit is compelling him even into danger and uncertainty and as I said a couple of weeks ago it's for no other reason that I'm sure that God is compelling me to go that I'm leaving thankfully without the fears quite that Paul had and hopefully without their realisation as well Paul also says that he doesn't hold his life sacrosanct in verse 24 I do not count my life of any value to myself if only I may finish my course in the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus I think sometimes we place too much value on the comfort and security of our own lives over the years as a minister as an archdeacon in the diocese

I've come across many ministers who refuse to leave a small geographical area of Melbourne because they think it would be too difficult or uncomfortable to go somewhere else or too far away sometimes I think we place too many restrictions on obeying God yes God I'm very happy to serve you so long as it's here in this place with this house and these comforts down the road then that's fine but not so for Paul he didn't hold his life as something of value in itself but rather to serve Jesus who died for him and if the gospel is worth dying for as Paul later did I guess in my mind going to Asia is nothing by comparison well in one sense coincidentally some may say providentially I was down to preach this passage today I had thought a little while ago that this could be a good passage to preach on November the 8th I'm sort of glad I've got it out of the way now personally I found it in preparing for today extremely moving and encouraging

I certainly am reluctant to claim the sort of example that Paul claims for himself for I know the many times that I failed in personal interactions with people and failed in an example of godliness I have sought to preach the whole counsel of god one of my hopes had been that if I were here long enough I would have completed preaching through the whole bible that's a few years to go if I was to do that I've preached on every book in the new testament and all the way through most of them except galatians and preached through a half the old testament I'd say but there's more to do and that'll be somebody else's job I think I can say with Paul that I've not shrunk from preaching god's word there are many hard bits in it hard to hear and hard to preach and I think thankfully under god

I've been given a spirit not of timidity but of courage to preach god's word the whole counsel of god I trust I must say I'm comforted and encouraged by this passage as we pray for a shepherd after god's own heart it's a great comfort to see what paul's example was and paul's urging and concern for the ephesian church was it's a comfort to me that to be reminded that holy trinity is god's flock it's not mine it never has been never will be it's god's and it's been challenging to realise again the huge responsibility that it is to be a shepherd over the flock of god whom god values so highly that his son's blood was shed for it the carnival may be nearly over i've no doubt that verse 37 will be reenacted in november there was much weeping among them though i hope the finality of verse 38 is not repeated grieving especially because of what he said that they would not see him again but i can say with full confidence and echo the words of paul in verse 32 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 amen

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