

Paul Farewells Ephesus (1) - I Did Not Shrink

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 11th of July 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Paul Farewells Ephesus, I Did Not Shrink, and is from Acts chapter 20 verses 17 to 38.

You're welcome to take out your handkerchief and wipe your eyes if you need to. It's quite moving really, and we might think it's a little bit overdone, but in some respects I think it's probably reasonably accurate in the sense of emotion and feeling.

I'm not sure about you, but my life's been punctuated by emotional farewells. I guess that's a result of the fact that I've moved often from Sydney to Melbourne and back to Sydney and back to Melbourne and twice to England and twice back from England and so on.

I remember when we were children, when we'd had a great holiday and we were leaving that place, driving home, each time we would sing the Carnival is Over, the Seekers song, and we'd be in tears because we've had such a great fortnight's holiday, and now we're crying as we're going back home to school or whatever it was.

[1 : 3 1] And I remember when I left Sydney after four enjoyable years at university and then working for a year, as a group of friends in convoy drove out of the college where I'd been living to take me to Central Station.

We switched on the car radio. It was already on when the car was started. And there was that song again, The Carnival is Over. Well, that set me off. I was in tears then for ages and ages.

I remember when I left England just over three years ago, making my farewell speech to the church where I was unable to finish it because I was in tears.

And maybe you're like me. I hate saying goodbye to people I don't think I'm going to see ever again or for a long time. They're very moving things. And I know on films the thing that cuts me up the most is when people say goodbye.

It really makes me very emotional. And even when we see sports stars retire, we see sometimes them fighting back their tears. Was it Jason Dunstall last year or some other sports star retiring and having tears?

[2 : 3 6] And we've just seen Tim Fisher bowing out as the deputy prime minister, maybe not with tears there. But there's a sense of emotion and sadness about farewell speeches.

And this speech of Paul to Ephesus is no exception, really. We're told at the end of it that there was much tears and much crying and grieving and sadness as they embraced at the end.

And I suspect that Paul's speech was probably made with that sense of emotion just under the surface as he spoke to them, very personally and very passionately.

This is one of the great speeches of the Bible. And we're going to deal with it not only this week, but also next week as well. Strictly speaking, Paul isn't at Ephesus, although it's the Ephesian elders whom he farewells.

He'd spent nearly three years probably at Ephesus, as we're told in this passage, and as we've seen over the last two or three weeks as well in the sermons from Acts chapter 19.

[3 : 40] And having left Ephesus after the riot, as we saw last week, he travels through Greece and Macedonia for a shortish time and then resolves to return to Jerusalem in time for the festival of Pentecost in about our sort of May-June period.

And on his way sailing south through the Aegean Sea, he stops at various Greek islands. And then he comes to this city port, a fairly prosperous city port of Miletus, which is 30 miles south of Ephesus.

He decided not to go to Ephesus itself because he didn't want to be too delayed. And I suspect he felt that if he got there, his emotions would keep him there for longer than he really wanted to be.

So he put in at Miletus further south and there summons the Ephesian elders. It would have taken probably up to two days for foot messengers to get to Ephesus and then no doubt the same length of time for those elders to get back to him at Miletus.

Now we know that that was a modern film. We don't have any ancient film of Paul, but we do have a very ancient archival photo of Paul at Miletus. And maybe, you know, you'd like to see that to get a better feel for what Paul at Miletus was like.

[4 : 56] There we are. There's Paul at Miletus. As you can see, the only Richmond supporter. It is actually... And this is actually on the west coast, I should tell you, though it's the west coast of Turkey.

And I'm reading this speech at Miletus to the gathered crowds, which included just the person taking the photograph. Thanks, Wilma. There are three points this week from this speech.

And next week we'll see some other points relating to the Ephesian elders and what they are to do. But these points this week relate to St Paul and his example, his words and his future.

And the first point is to do with the example of Paul's life. Remember that he's lived with these Ephesians for three years in the time that he was speaking to them and ministering to them.

And in this speech, at the beginning and at the end, there is a little section about where he reminds them of the example of his life. Verses 18 and 19 and then 33 to 35.

[6 : 06] But what he says here is not an idle boast. We could easily read this and think, what a boastful man St Paul is to proudly say all these things that he's done.

But remember, he's speaking to people who knew him well and had seen him work for three years. So there was no pretense here.

What he spoke was true. Because the people to whom he spoke it would know if he was speaking falsehood, if he were arrogantly boasting in himself. Indeed, verse 18 and verse 34, in each of the two sections, tells the people, you know this.

So he's not telling them something they don't know when he describes the example of his life. Therefore, when we read this, don't think that he's proud and arrogant.

Recognise that he's being honest about the example of his life. And there are several features that he reminds them of. In verse 19, he says, remember what I've done, serving the Lord.

[7 : 11] That was his motivation. Not self-serving, but serving the Lord Jesus Christ with what he did. Putting Jesus first. The idea of service here is of slavery.

Jesus was his master, in effect, for the whole of the time that he was at Ephesus. And secondly, that service was in humility. Humbly serving Jesus.

Not trying to be the boss or the Lord of the church, but rather to exercise humility under Jesus in his service of him and in his ministry in Ephesus.

He wasn't arrogant in what he did, but humble. And thirdly, in 19, we're told that it was with tears. Not because he was a crybaby, but because he had such a personal commitment to these people that he felt for them in their pain.

And he rejoiced with them in their joy. His ministry wasn't remote. He didn't walk into a meeting of Ephesians and read a Bible reading or preach a sermon and walk out again and never have contact personally with these people.

[8 : 23] He was committed to them. He was emotionally attached to them. Because Christian ministry is not about, really, in the end, remote ministry. It's about personal ministry.

It's about people ministering to people. And fourthly, in verse 19, he says that his ministry was with endurance, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews.

We saw last week the riot of the pagans, when the production line, if you like, of making the statues of the god Diana or Artemis began to dry up, the riot that was caused.

Although Paul here is referring to the riots or the persecutions of the Jews rather than the pagans, it's clear then that in his three years at Ephesus, he's received opposition and strong opposition from both Jew and pagan.

It hasn't been easy and Paul has not given up. Whatever the opposition he's faced, and he tells us not only here but in other places just how severe that is, where his life was under threat several times, he has endured it.

[9 : 34] That's a mark of Christian ministry. I see people in ministry of various sorts who face a hardship or opposition and give up. Paul's ministry endured through the difficulties, through the opposition, through the persecution, through the trials.

No doubt he was patient, but more than that, no doubt full of strength and fortitude as well. A strength that comes from God himself, no doubt. And then in the end of his speech, verses 33 to 35, the example he reminds them of here is an example of generosity.

He hasn't coveted what other people have got. He hasn't been greedy for gain for himself. But rather he's actually worked hard so that they did not have to pay him, so that the gospel would be preached to them free of charge, and so that his example of generosity fits the preaching of generosity, of God's generosity as well.

Now this example of Paul is consistent and thorough. He doesn't appeal to one particular event of being generous, or one particular event of preaching or serving.

But he says in verse 18, how you yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in it, in Asia.

[11 : 05] He's saying there that his example has been thorough and consistent from day one through to the end of that three year period. All the time, that has typified Paul's example.

Service, humility, tears, endurance, generosity. It's a striking example.

How do we respond to it? Do we find it too intimidating? Or are we attracted by this example of Christian excellence? I remember a bit over ten years ago going to a Christian conference where the speaker talked about his own practice of Christian devotion and ministry.

It was a stunning example. But there were some of my peers who were repelled by it, who felt that his claims somehow verged on arrogance and boastfulness and idealism.

I must say I was inspired by it and that conference has changed my life. How does Paul's example fit with you?

[12 : 30] How does the example of any Christian excellence that you see fit with you? Does it inspire you and lift you up? Does it challenge you? Does it excite you?

Or are you perhaps repelled by it and think, well, it's all very well for them they must have something special but I don't have that. I'll just continue in my swampy mediocrity.

Paul is not boasting. He's not seeking applause. But he knows that as a Christian leader one of his essential jobs is to model Christian living.

And he's saying here I've done it. And he's saying this to inspire and excite and challenge and uplift and stir up the Ephesian elders to do the same.

And so ought that such examples be for us to challenge us to lift our sights to lift our game to lift our life onto a higher plane of Christian discipline and devotion.

[13 : 40] But what Paul's saying here as well applies for any person in Christian leadership. Not only those like me who lead churches or preach but any of you who lead Bible study groups or other sorts of groups any of you who are Christian parents leading your Christian or leading your children.

St. Paul is saying that Christian leaders must take responsibility to live a godly example of life.

It's not an optional extra. Paul is taking that responsibility here. He's not shunning it. He's not putting it to one side and saying well the task of preaching is all I'm about.

And for any Christian leader any Christian parent or anyone who aspires to Christian leadership Paul is saying something we need to take heed of.

Our example must be excellent. Our lives must be exemplary if we're involved as either Christian parents or leaders in any way.

[14 : 53] Paul goes on into the second point to talk about his words but at this point I want to make sure we see how they're matched. What he says is what he does.

He never says don't do what I do but do what I say. His words match his life. If they're not in any Christian leader then the words will not be heeded.

But because of Paul's example his words have greater credibility. I mean how would a person respond to a minister who keeps preaching peace but in his own relationships always practices war.

Or the minister who preaches forgiveness but it's clear bears resentment at any wrong that's done against him and keeps a record of people and dates and times and events and words that were said or done against him.

Or the minister who preaches generosity but is known by his practical stinginess. None of those words would be heeded by a congregation.

[16 : 00] Paul is saying his life has modelled what he says. Now in some Christian circles St. Paul is not the flavour of the month but oh that his critics lived like he did.

Well the second point leading on from this is his message. he's reminded them of his life as an example and now he reminds them of his chief task his message of preaching and teaching.

And that's very clear in this speech to the Ephesian elders. We see many words that describe his preaching and teaching. In verse 20 I did not shrink from doing anything helpful proclaiming the message and teaching you.

And then in verse 21 he talks about testifying to both Jews and Greeks. The same word testify in verse 24. And in verse 25 he talks about proclaiming the kingdom.

In verse 27 declaring and in verse 31 warning you. Word upon word about his speaking preaching and teaching.

[17 : 13] His proclaiming his declaring his testifying his warning. Fundamentally Paul's ministry has been a ministry of the word. Of speaking to people in various ways.

And that matches what we've seen already in recent weeks. Because in his time in Ephesus we were told a couple of weeks ago I think three weeks ago when he was there that every day he would be in the synagogue and then in the public hall speaking about testifying to declaring proclaiming Jesus Christ.

What he's saying here matches what he did. And the content of what he says is the gospel. He calls it the message in verse 20. He summarises it in verse 21 as repentance and faith.

There's the heart of the Christian call to a person. What do you do in response to the message? Repent, that is to turn away from your wrongdoing, turn to God, and faith.

Trusting in the gospel of Jesus Christ and his death for you. What Paul is summarising the gospel as in that verse is no different to what Jesus said. The very beginning of Jesus' own ministry.

[18 : 25] The kingdom is at hand, repent and believe the good news. And Paul is doing the same sort of thing here. In verse 24 he summarises the content of what he's spoken about as the good news of God's grace.

The good news is the word that translates literally the word gospel. gospel is good news. And it's good news of God's grace because it's not something we have to achieve or attain but is rather a gift of God's generosity.

That's summed up in the word grace. He calls it proclaiming the kingdom in verse 25. It's not a different thing this. These are synonymous terms in effect.

To proclaim the kingdom is to preach the good news of God's grace. It is to say that entry into God's kingdom and therefore submitting under the king Jesus Christ is God's gift to us.

And the entry point is repentance and faith. And in verse 27 he makes it clear that he's not just preaching a simplistic message or a one-sided message but rather he has declared the whole purpose of God.

[19 : 35] From beginning to end. From creation to the end of time. And yet that whole purpose of God is still summarised by the terms repentance and faith or kingdom or good news of God's grace.

Paul's priority was to preach the gospel. And though he was concerned for the poor and the weak as he says at the end of this speech, though no doubt he was concerned for people's physical lives, his fundamental passion, priority, commitment, his *raison d'être* for being in, of Ephesus, was to preach the gospel.

Elsewhere in one of his letters he says, woe to me if I do not preach the gospel because he was under compulsion to do so, under God's own commission and charge to him.

And like the example of his life, his preaching also was thorough. He says that he preached and testified and declared publicly in verse 20 and privately from house to house.

We know that he spoke publicly in the synagogue. When he was kicked out of there he spoke publicly in the public hall. But as well as that he went from house to house, speaking to people, to individuals, to families, to small groups gathered.

[21 : 03] not only was he thorough in speaking publicly and privately but he was unlimited in the audience.

He was Jew and Gentile or Greek as it's sometimes translated as it is here. That is to Jews and non-Jews. In a sense he wasn't fussy. He preached to anyone, anywhere, anytime, because he tells us in verse 31 it was day and night.

night. He didn't clock off at 5pm and say well sorry you'll have to wait till the office opens at night. Day and night, Jew and Gentile, public and private, Paul would speak and preach the gospel to anyone, any place, anytime, anyhow.

And he preached to them, he declared to them the whole purpose of God. That is not just a simple message.

Not just a praisey or an edited version. Not just a version that leaves out some of the difficult things. Paul preached in depth and in breadth.

[22 : 16] That's one reason why I have as a policy I guess in ministry to preach regularly through all sorts of different parts of the Bible. And if I'm at Holy Trinity for 25 years or more, then I've calculated that basically I will have preached through virtually every book of the Bible, if not every chapter, but the main chapters of each book of the Bible.

Partly because that I think is a good discipline for us all. That every part of God's word speaks to us, the hard bits and the easy bits. And it's also one reason why at Holy Trinity at least, basically our preaching is determined by Bible passages rather than say topics or current events.

Now there are some churches where you go to where the topic is what controls what's preached. My hesitation with that system or polity is that it's consumer driven.

By preaching through the whole Bible, I think we're more closely going to be God driven rather than consumer driven. Paul makes an interesting comment about this thoroughness of his preaching and teaching.

In both verse 20 and verse 27 he says, I did not shrink from doing this. Now why would he say that?

[23 : 41] He says it because there must be an inclination to shrink away from bold and thorough preaching the whole purpose of God. Otherwise he wouldn't make the point.

but what he says reflects I think what is right. That there is a temptation at least to limit or modify or edit what is declared.

Because there are some parts of God's truth that are difficult. Not only difficult to understand but difficult to accept as well. It's not often that you hear sermons about judgment.

Because very few parishioners will walk out of church shaking the vicar's hand saying lovely to hear a sermon about judgment and hell. I think what Paul is saying here is that he was bold enough to preach everything he could about the truth of God as it was revealed to him in the scriptures.

Sometimes the gospel is not met with eager ears. The riots in Ephesus in Paul's day testify to that. And not every time when I preach do I look for or expect warm not applause but response.

[25 : 01] Because I know there will be times when the gospel as it's preached from scripture when we preach it thoroughly and throughout all its parts will actually be resisted in our hearts because it's not all easy.

Free grace doesn't come cheaply. but Paul also knew that the gospel was powerful and therefore boldly he preached it.

Now our day and age I think is in no lesser need of such ministry. I must confess I'm daunted by Paul's example speaking day and night public and private in public halls and going from house to house.

But what Paul recognised and what we ought to recognise too is that our fundamental need is to know and obey the gospel in all its fullness as God has revealed it to us in the scriptures.

That must remain the fundamental priority of Christian ministry. And I know all too well that there are many distractions from it. Good things distracting from what is the best or most important.

- [26 : 23] Sadly also the need for such ministry is seen in the fact that in so many churches and Christians lives there is theological confusion. There is crippling doubt.

Paul was clear. Even though not every question about life and the universe and everything in it is answered by God's revelation. There is enough for us to be clear and certain about the fundamentals of God's truth.

As he preaches Paul's responsibility for the Ephesians is over. He has discharged his duty. He says in verse 27, I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

I have done my duty, he says. I have completed my ministry in Ephesus. What then if the Ephesians fail? What then if they follow heresy or practice immorality or give up their faith?

Paul says of that in verse 26, I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you. That may look as though he's shunning responsibility but it is not.

- [27 : 49] Paul knows that for the time that he's been called to be in Ephesus he has discharged his duty. He has preached and declared the whole purpose of God. He hasn't held back.

he hasn't cheated them of things that they ought to have heard and known. And like a passage in the Old Testament that talks of the prophet being a watchman whose job it is to in effect be a sentinel to warn the people of impending judgment or doom and therefore urge them to flee to safety.

Paul has done that. He's fulfilled his duty. If they don't heed the warnings, if they don't respond appropriately to the gospel, he is not to blame.

He has spoken what he's needed to say. And if the people fail to heed that, their blood is not on his head. In that passage in the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, the false watchman is the one who does not warn the people.

And if they suffer, the guilt of them is not only their own, but the watchman's or prophets as well. Paul is saying he is exonerated from any blame if the Ephesians go on to fail God.

- [29 : 15] It's a bit like the work cover safety advertisements on TV, isn't it? Paul is saying here, I've thought it, I've taught it, and I've worked it.

I've done what the state government is telling me to do. So if you go and fall through the spiritual roof, so to speak, I'm not guilty of your blood.

Because I've done everything I need to and ought to for your spiritual safety. think it, talk it, work it. Paul's done all that.

You may have heard of the person who preaches so well and yet lives so badly. When he's in the pulpit, the people wish he'd never leave the pulpit.

And when he's out of the pulpit, they know that he ought never to go into it. That's not Paul. His words and his life are exemplary. Well, the third point is his uncertain future.

- [30 : 22] This is discussed in verses 22 to 24. He says to them, no doubt with some emotion and feeling, and now as a captive to the spirit, I am 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 and the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus, that is to testify to the good news of God's grace.

Paul is being directed by God himself to go to Jerusalem, and yet he expects the worst, because not only is God's spirit directing him to Jerusalem, but God's spirit is also telling him that he faces punishment, suffering, abuse, and probable death.

You see, Paul is infamous for Jews. He was well known as one of the leading crusaders against Christians who turned and became a Christian.

his fears are expressed at the end of the letter to the Romans, which he must have written at about this time. He asks the Roman church to pray for him as he heads to Jerusalem, and history shows that his fears were valid, and we'll see that over the next couple of months in the evening sermons as we complete the book of Acts.

[32 : 00] There are two things to note here about these words of his future. One is that he's compelled by God's spirit, yet his life is under threat. It's God's plan for Paul to suffer, even to die.

Imagine what other Christians will have thought when Paul was going to Jerusalem. Some of them tried to persuade him not to go. They knew the danger that lay ahead for him, and most of us would try and rationalise and say, well, God's spirit can't be leading me to where I'm going to be arrested unjustly, probably, and sentenced to death.

Why would God send me, a preacher, to such a place? Surely Paul must have faced such a temptation not to go to Jerusalem.

And yet he's obedient to God's call because God is calling him in the end to die for the gospel. We've got to recognise here that God's values sometimes don't quite match ours.

Last month, a colleague, friend of mine, vicar of Roval, died suddenly. He was found having had a heart attack in his study, age 55.

[33 : 21] Why? His was a parish that didn't have a church building. It was just being built. He was the first vicar of the parish in a new area.

If any parish in the diocese depended upon its minister at that time, Roval would have been it. What a tragedy. What a human tragedy.

How odd it seems for that to have happened. And yet God's values, God's purposes are bigger than we can quite work out sometimes.

not to say that my friend Brian was quite like St. Paul, but Paul's imminent death would serve God's purposes the best, rather than keeping him alive to keep on preaching.

But the second point is that Paul understands those values. He doesn't think his life is sacrosanct. He doesn't value his human life as the most precious thing that he's got.

[34 : 24] He doesn't seek to preserve his life at all costs. The most important thing for St. Paul is to finish his course or to finish his race is the metaphor that he uses here.

Paul is saying the most important thing is that I finish my life faithful to the gospel. And if that means a martyr's death then so be it.

Paul's begun the race, but it's finishing that matters. I remember when I was at school, I've never been a good sports person, but I remember going running.

It was a 1500 metres event I think, and I was leading. And it was astonishing. Although I'd only done 100 metres, by the time I got to 800 metres I was last by a long way.

And by the time I got to 1500 metres I was just barely staggering over the line. You see, it's not how we start that matters. It's about finishing the race faithfully and winning God's prize.

[35 : 37] Now let's make sure that we live our lives like that. That we don't value our human life and health so much that we compromise our faithfulness to the gospel.

people. For what matters more than our life is our faithfulness to God's truth about Jesus Christ. It's intriguing that we spend so much effort in our life seeking to preserve it and prolong it, despite the fact that old people tell us don't get old.

And we don't spend the same amount of energy and time and money preserving our faith. Paul's concern here is not just a model for Christian leadership, it is a model for every Christian.

For in some of his letters he makes the same point to every Christian. Finish the race. Be faithful to the end. Persevere in your faith.

And do not value your life more highly than it. what good questions to think about for ourselves. Is your sight on the finishing line of persevering in Christian faith?

[36 : 50] For many of you, you're just starting out. You're in the first hundred metres. Are you going to finish your life in the same faith that you're starting at now?

Are you exercising your faith so that you'll endure to the end? So that your faith will endure through trials and troubles and tribulations that this life will throw up.

John Wesley, Charles Wesley, sorry, expressed it this way in a famous hymn. Happy if with my final breath I might but gasp his name.

Preach him to all and cry in death. Christ Jesus is the Lamb. Lord, as we fall over the finishing tape, so to speak, may those be our words on our lips as they were St.

Paul's. Let's pray. O God, we thank you for the extraordinary example of St.

[38 : 01] Paul in his ministry. May we seek to imitate him as he imitates the Lord Jesus. May our lives be exemplary.

May the gospel have priority. And may we persevere in faith despite trials, that Jesus may be glorified in all things.

Amen. Part two next week. Part two next week. Thank you. Thank you.

You obra