

The Ministry that Sustains

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- [0:00] For my daughter who's doing VCE along with a few others, like Rufus up at the back, for my daughter doing VCE, the thing that helps her endure is the four-month holiday at the end.
- And before that, the chance to get all dressed up at the funeral. The formal. Wow.
- Wow. Let's move on. For my other daughter, who still wants a dog, the key to enduring is getting the rest of her family on site.
- In fact, I busted her calling a meeting with all her siblings late one night. I saw the light on and the door closed. I could hear them whispering behind. I kind of put my head to the door and I heard my youngest say, we all know the problem is dad.
- But if we all work together, they're still working. It was about the dog. Yep. But what about when it comes to our church and our faith?
- [1:08] What are the keys to helping us endure? What is it that sustains us? Because last week we saw that the gospel offends. In fact, in Ephesus, it caused a huge riot.
- And now to be clear, our manner should never offend. You know, the way we speak and act towards others, that should never offend. But our message about Jesus being the only way to God will sometimes offend.
- And so it can sometimes cause opposition, can't it? And so how do we endure through that? Or sometimes we'll face false teaching. How do we endure through that? Or sometimes it's just simply exhaustion.
- How do we endure through that? Well, today Luke shows us Paul's pattern of ministry that sustained the early church as he does his farewell tour.
- You see, last week we started a new section in Acts. I've said a few times that Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, kind of groups his material by way of these summary sentences, how the word spreads or the church is strengthened and so on.
- [2:13] And then last week we began a new section where he heads towards Jerusalem. In fact, it's a bit like Luke's gospel where Jesus sets out for Jerusalem and that they both face increasing opposition as they head towards Jerusalem.
- And so from chapter 19, verse 21 to the end of the book, Paul journeys to Jerusalem and to Rome. And as Ricky said last week, this is not so much Paul's decision, but it's actually the Spirit's prompting.
- Because in verse 22 and 23 of our passage today, that's what Paul says. He says, and now compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.
- And so he's saying farewell, doing his farewell tour, as it were, going around to the different churches and doing what he can to help them endure because he doesn't know what's going to happen to him.
- And as we look at what Paul does, it will teach us what we can do to help us endure, you see, to keep going in our own faith.

[3 : 26] It's a long chapter. We're not going to be able to cover it all. But the first key to endurance is repeated encouragement. So point one in your outline, verse one to three in your Bibles.

Have a look there. When the uproar from the riot last week in Ephesus, when the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia.

He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria.

He decided to go back through Macedonia. Now, to kind of help you understand what's going on and how Paul goes out of his way here, remember, he said he wants to go to Jerusalem, right?

That's what we saw last week, chapter 19, verse 21. But he wants to go passing through Macedonia and Achaia and you think, oh yeah, well, fair enough. Maybe it's on the way, but it's not. So this map is obviously too small for you to see.

[4 : 30] So look at the colored dots. In about the middle of the map is the yellow dot. Can you see that? Against the kind of pinkish salmon, whatever color that is. That's Ephesus. That's where Paul is.

Now, Jerusalem is the bottom right-hand red dot. Can you see the red dot, bottom right-hand? That's where he wants to go, Jerusalem. That's what he said, right? But do you know where Macedonia and Achaia are?

Top left-hand corner where the black dots are. It's the complete opposite direction, you see. Paul is taking the extraordinarily long way around to go to Jerusalem.

Why? Well, verse 2, so he can speak many words of encouragement to the people because that's what's going to help them endure, you see.

Saying things, as Michelle said, are truths from God's word, like remember our inheritance in the world to come. So keep clinging to Christ. It will be worth it. Saying those kinds of words of encouragement.

[5 : 30] Here's the first key to endurance, words of encouragement. It's why Paul goes out of his way to pass through Macedonia and Achaia. And at the end of verse 3, he goes back through again.

It's repeated words of encouragement. But notice also he does this with others. So in verses 4 to 6, he mentions a team of people from different places.

And Helen did very well to read all these out in the Bible reading. These people are from all sorts of backgrounds, whether it's Sopatra from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius and Timothy from Derby, and so on.

And Paul's pattern of ministry was team ministry with others. And this is also a key to helping the church endure. You see, the Christian life is not a solo sport, is it?

God doesn't save us and then leave us on our own. Rather, he unites us and gathers us as family, doesn't he? And as family, where we can meet together and speak words of encouragement to each other.

[6 : 33] I was speaking with someone during the week who had a fall and broke her arm. And while she said that online church has been good, she said it's just not the same.

And it isn't. And we felt that through the lockdowns, didn't we? We don't get a chance to see each other and to encourage and be encouraged by one another. Nor is there an opportunity to do ministry together, which is another great thing about HGD.

There's people from all sorts of backgrounds. I haven't met anyone from Berea yet, but there's people from all sorts of backgrounds who work together with one another to build the church.

And so the first application for us this morning, and it's kind of missing the little arrow on your outline. Sorry about that. But are we part of this? Are we part of Paul's pattern of ministry here, where we speak words of encouragement to each other and where we work together with one another?

Because this is what sustains us, both our church and our faith, especially when we face opposition or even exhaustion. When people get tired, I sometimes hear they say they just need to take a break from church and it will refresh them and their faith.

[7 : 48] But in God's kingdom, there are lots of opposites, right? One thing we're not going to get to in our passage today is right at the end where Jesus says it's better to give than receive. That's not the way the world works, right?

The world says it's better to get than to give. But Jesus, it's opposite in God's kingdom. And we kind of know that's true, don't we? You know, when we give and help people out, we feel good about ourselves, don't we?

There is that blessing in it. Well, another opposite in God's kingdom is you actually don't take breaks from church to refresh your faith. You actually come and encourage one another and serve.

And again, in that kind of giving, you are encouraged. You are refreshed. You feel good about yourself. And so are we part of this?

As we are able. Everyone has different abilities and capacities. That's fine. But as we're able, are we part of this? Are we seeking to encourage one another? Serve one another in whatever way we can?

[8 : 47] Repeated encouragement with words and with others is the first key to endurance. And the second is repeated preaching of God's word. Point to verse 7. Have a look in verse 7.

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, when the Bible was read at that point, I heard a few people gasp. Don't worry. This is not permission for me to preach until midnight. It was a special occasion, wasn't it?

Paul was about to leave, wasn't he? And this was the last chance he had. And so they kind of gathered on the first day of the week, on the Sunday, probably in the evening. They had a meal together and Paul spoke.

But then look what happened. Do you remember verse 8? There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Luke's writing this and he's joined them. So he says we were meeting there.

[9 : 45] Seated in the window was a young man named Eutychus who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead.

Now, this is a bit humorous, but it's not a cautionary tale about where to sit in church. Avoid the windows along there.

Ironically, Eutychus' name means lucky, not at this particular point. But nor is it a cautionary tale about keeping sermons short, lest we put people to sleep permanently.

Because as we'll see, Paul, after this, keeps on talking. Rather, I think it seems to be a living parable of what God's word gives, which is life.

Because look at what happens in verse 10 and 11. Verse 10, Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. Don't be alarmed, he said.

[10:48] He's now alive. Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. And after talking until daylight, then he left. Here, Paul acts like the two prophets in the Old Testament who raise the dead, Elijah and Elisha.

And both of them raise young men or boys. Both of them put their arms around them in some way to do so. And Elijah was even in an upper room. So there's all these parallels here.

And so Paul wasn't just talking on and on about the latest fashion or the cost of living. He was acting like a prophet who spoke God's word. And this word brings life.

You see, sandwiched between Paul's preaching is Eutychus' raising. And so now he really is lucky. He's alive. And so I wonder if this miracle not only shows Paul is like a prophet who speaks God's word.

But I wonder if this miracle is also like a living parable that shows us what God's word gives. Namely, life. Not just life to our bodies when Jesus returns, but life to our souls now.

[12:00] Both new spiritual life when we believe in Jesus. But ongoing refreshment, spiritual refreshment when we listen to his word.

As Psalm 19 says, the law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. And again, I think we know this, don't we? I don't know about you, but when I read verses like 1 John 3, see what great love the Father has lavished on us.

That we should be called children of God and that is what we are. Is that not uplifting? Or when we read Romans chapter 8 verse 32, To God who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all?

How will not God also, along with Christ, graciously give us all things we need to keep going? Is that not encouraging? God's word is life-giving.

It reminds us how loved we are of what God has done for us. And it refreshes our soul, doesn't it? And so no wonder Paul kept preaching till daybreak.

[13:04] And no wonder we read in verse 12, The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted. The word comforted here is exactly the same word as encouragement back in verse 2, in the original language that it was written in.

The people are encouraged, not just by Eutychus being alive, but by the preaching they've heard. And so here's another key to our church and our faith enduring.

The preaching of God's word. And so the second application then is, are we listening to it? Not just staying awake for it, which I know can sometimes be hard to do, but really absorbing it.

That we might be refreshed by it. Repeated preaching is what helps our church and our faith endure. And Luke shows us this, not just with Paul and Eutychus, but also with Paul and the elders at Ephesus.

And so we're going to skip over a bit here, but in verses 13 to 16, Paul is in a hurry to go back to Jerusalem. And in verse 17, he calls the elders of the church to meet him on the coast at Miletus, rather than going back into the city himself.

[14:18] And in verse 18, he looks back at his ministry, which involves serving Jesus with tireless teaching. So pick it up at verse 19. Have you got your Bibles there?

Verse 19. He says, You see, at the start of verse 19, he says, I've served the Lord Jesus.

And for him, that was tireless teaching. So verse 19, he persevered through tears and through testing. It was tireless. And in verse 20, he preached and taught.

It was teaching. And it included, verse 21, evangelism, declaring to all that they must turn to God and have faith in Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus alone is the one who died to pay for our sins, isn't he? And so he is the one we're to believe in to have eternal life. And if you're visiting here this morning and you don't yet believe in Jesus, then you need to if you want to receive that eternal life.

[15:48] But for us who do, then this is how the church endures. Through this repeated preaching. Both to bring people to Christ and strengthen us already in Christ.

And we see this idea again. But this time, Paul ups the ante with sacrificial testifying. So verse 22, he says, And now compelled by the Spirit, this is the verse we saw before, 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 that the Lord Jesus has given me. The task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

Do you see how Paul ups the ante here? He counts his life as though nothing compared to serving Christ. He doesn't care about his future suffering, only his serving of Jesus.

[17:00] Only finishing the race, only completing the task, which for him was evangelism, was testifying to the good news of Jesus.

And because of this, the church did grow and endure. Now, of course, we weren't given this specific task like Paul was, were we? Not to be a missionary like he was, but we are to imitate his attitude of serving Jesus.

Because that's what we see in both verse 19 and verse 24. He served Jesus with his all. What about our abilities or opportunities?

Whether it's serving behind the scenes, whether it's serving by sharing the good news, as Paul did, or whether it's serving in some other way. We are to serve even sacrificially, willing to count the cost.

Serving Christ above our comfort when we're tired, above our concerns when they weigh on us, above even our kids' or parents' desires when they pressure us.

[18:04] It takes wisdom, I need to say, to know how hard to push back on these things. Like sometimes we're so tired we really do need a holiday. Sometimes we, you know, might let the kids go to that party on a Sunday morning.

A good litmus test is to ask ourselves, would we miss work for this thing that we're missing church for? That might be a helpful thing. But the goal ought always be Christ above comfort.

Our concerns and even our kids' or parents' desires. Christ needs to be above them all. For this is how our church and our faith endures. I mean, when you think about it, it's logical, isn't it?

You know, if we always put our comfort above Christ, or our concerns above Christ, or our kids' or parents' concerns, then they will take over our life, won't they? And then bit by bit, we'll drift away from church and away from Christ.

I'm pretty sure most of us have seen people do that, haven't we, sadly? And so are we imitating Paul's costly service to Christ here? Are we willing to count the cost and put Christ above all else?

[19:15] For that's another key for our faith to endure. Of course, Paul's service here was specifically teaching and testifying. It's that repeated preaching that we've seen highlighted and that Luke highlights again.

Do you see verse 25 at the top of the page? Now I know, says Paul, talking to the elders of Ephesus, 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, he says.

Paul is, as I said, speaking to the elders, but he's actually been preaching at the church for the last three years. And he says he's not hesitated to preach the whole will of God.

That is, the whole plan of God. What he promised in the Old Testament, what Christ fulfilled in the New Testament, and how we're to live in light of it.

[20:17] It's why we look at books from both New and Old Testament. We're starting an Old Testament book next week, Zephaniah. I wonder how many people have read Zephaniah. I won't ask for a show of hands, it's okay. But the point is, this is what sustains the church.

In fact, for the record, I don't think I've ever read through all of Zephaniah until I was preparing, so I'm not trying to guilt trip anyone. But this is what sustains the church, because God's word firstly protects it from false teachers who distort the truth.

Do you see verse 28? He goes on to say, Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the 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. 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. I saw this thing online last week and it started with the question, what is worse than a wolf in sheep's clothing?

[21:31] It's not really a joke. It's this question thing. I don't know what you think. What is worse than a wolf in sheep's clothing? And the thing went on to say, a shepherd, a wolf in shepherd's clothing.

Do you see the point it's making? And that's true, isn't it? For false teachers can destroy the church. I used to be part of a church growing up where there was a false teacher who got in the pulpit and it divided the church.

And to this day, I'm getting old. It was a while ago. But to this day, the church still hasn't recovered. False teachers can even preach a different gospel which leads people towards hell.

And so the elders are to watch themselves in case they become false teachers and they're to watch the flock in case it's infiltrated by false teachers.

For the church is precious. Did you see how precious you are, by the way, in verse 28? Verse 28 says, the church of God which he bought with his own blood.

[22:39] God the Son bought you with his own blood which makes us incredibly precious. Do you realize that God would not pay any other price?

He would not pay the blood of his Son for anyone else other than you. I mean, that's pretty extraordinary when you think about it. He's not willing to pay the price of his only Son for anything or anyone else except for us.

That's how precious we are. And so, the elders are to watch over this precious church. And the way they are to watch is with the Bible open.

God's Word is a protecting Word that helps us not be fooled by what is false. That's why I always ask you to follow along with your Bibles open. Not just to help you stay awake but so that you can check the truth.

And so, watching with the Word open protects the church from false teaching and it's also what sustains it and builds it. This will be the last verse that we'll look at. Verse 32. He says, Here, God and His Word are combined as one thing because God works through His Word.

[24:03] And God works through His Word to build up not just the elders but the flock of believers. And God works through His Word to sustain until they reach their inheritance with every other Christian who's been sanctified or saved.

Paul commits them to God's Word of grace. For God works through His Word to protect from wolves to build in maturity and to sustain us until glory.

And so, again, the application is are we listening to it? Perhaps even taking sermon notes to help us listen and absorb it. I saw some kids' sermon notes last week. This one says, at the top, who was preaching?

And old man is what the kid wrote. On the left-hand side, what is the passage? Luke 19. On the right-hand side, what words did you didn't know? He wrote zucchini. I think it meant Zacchaeus because Luke 19 is Zacchaeus.

Down the bottom, my favorite song today, the fast one. What did you learn? Jesus came to save. Hey, that's not bad. Now, notes may not work for you.

[25:13] That's okay. But the point is, if God works through His Word to protect, to build, and to sustain us, to help us endure, then we need to listen to it, don't we? And so are we, not just at church, but on our own.

You know, listening to God preach to us directly, as it were, when we read the Bible for ourselves. It's why I send out devotions every week in the 1030 E News.

I think it gets maybe two clicks. That's all right. As long as you're reading the Word on your own, somehow or other. Or reading it with one, one-to-one, with others, or in a growth group.

If you're not in one and would like to be, talk to me. We need to take time to hear it, reflect on it, and let it protect us, build us, and sustain us. I need to finish. I don't know what you're having trouble enduring at the moment.

I'm guessing for most of us it won't be VCE exams, although I know it is for Rufus at the back. And I'm pretty sure for most of us it won't be a dad who won't let you get a dog. But we all need to keep enduring in our Christian faith, don't we?

[26:20] And the keys to enduring are repeated encouragement with words and with others, imitating costly service to our Lord Jesus, and repeated preaching of His Word in some way that it may continue to protect us, build us, and sustain us.

Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we pray that you would help us to learn from Paul's pattern of ministry today that strengthened your early church so that it endured in his day.

Help us to learn from it so that our church and our faith will endure through our day. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.