

Paul's Farewell Address

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[0 : 01] Let us pray. We have confessed you to you among ourselves our faith.

And now we pray that you would soften our hearts to receive your word to us. In Christ's name, amen. Please be seated.

Our text this morning as we hear from the living God and his word is Acts chapter 20.

Acts is a fast-moving account of the spread of the gospel through the Roman Empire in the 30 years after Christ's resurrection. And quite honestly, I've found it hard just to keep up with Paul.

All the places and the names and the conflicts and the activity to keep track of. And right about now, I need a breather.

[1 : 17] And I think that's exactly what Luke gives us in chapter 20. In verses 17 to 38 of this chapter, we have what I'm calling Paul's farewell address.

Spoken to the elders of the Ephesian church the last time he'll ever see them. Now, the text assigned for today is all of chapter 20.

So let me set this up and I'll just touch on the first 16 verses, quickly getting to verse 17. A little review. In Acts 18, verse 23, Paul sets out from Antioch on his third missionary journey.

And he travels up through what is modern-day Turkey, strengthening the disciples he'd made way back on his first journey. And then in chapter 19, verse 1, he arrives in Ephesus on the coast in Asia.

He spends three months arguing and pleading with the Jews about the kingdom of God before opposition in that city drives him out of the synagogue whereupon for two years.

[2 : 29] He argues every day in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus. And God did miracles through Paul and people were delivered from the occult.

You remember the book burning? Fifty thousand silver pieces. And the silversmiths who made the shrines for Artemis feared they'd be ruined if Paul kept this up. So they stir up a riot and Paul leaves town after three years in Ephesus.

And chapter 20 picks up at that point. If you have your Bibles or you don't have your own Bible, open the blue Bible if you would there to chapter 20.

I think you'll enjoy the way I preach more if you actually follow with the text carefully. Chapter 20, verse 1. After the uproar ceased, that is in Ephesus, Paul sent for the disciples and having exhorted them, took leave of them and departed from Macedonia.

He's off again. And then verses 2 to 6 are just a summary really of Paul's travels. It's also briefly related because if you want to, you can have a look at the maps you also have on your service sheet.

[3 : 38] We're not going to use them much today, but they're there. The one on the left on the front, just to show you. By verse 6, Paul's already gone through Macedonia there on the north, down along the left side, probably down to Corinth in Greece, and then back all the way around again to return to Troas in northwestern Asia.

That's all in verses 2 to 6, that left-hand map. That doesn't mean it didn't take Paul a long time to do that. It did. It probably took him as much as a year and a half to do that journey.

Just in those verses, that's significant. And I'll just say one little footnote about it to add to this. In verse 3, we know that Paul spent time in Greece on this trip, probably in Corinth for those months, and while he was there, just so you know this, many scholars say that's when Paul wrote the book of Romans.

It was in the middle of this journey. I think it's helpful to know that, so I just mention it. And so in verse 6 now, Paul's back in Troas, and Luke had joined up with them again, too, in the middle of all this, and in verses 7 to 12 then, Paul and some other believers are meeting in Troas, and Paul just

literally talks on and on and on all night.

And poor Eutychus, just a boy, his name means lucky, which he was, poor Eutychus falls asleep, he falls out of the third-story window, where he was sitting, I guess, and he's taken up for dead.

[5 : 17] The apostle seizes him, embraces him, and he lives. I think it's another one of God's great miracles, worked through Paul, validating his authority.

I think there's echoes of Old Testament prophets in that, but I'm going to leave that story. Except to say that I do find it oddly comforting that people fell asleep even when the apostle Paul was talking. So, if you drift slightly, I won't be offended. Well, from Troas then, beginning in verse 13 through 16, Paul sets course for Jerusalem.

Luke says he wants to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost, which I think suggests even at this point, Pentecost is an important day in the life of the early church. Paul's eager to get back to where it all started.

Remember? Pentecost in Jerusalem. It seems he has an appointment with the Spirit of God there, and he intends to keep it. Now, on the second map you have on the right-hand side, last time we used the maps, it shows Paul sailing from Troas then down along the sea, off of Asia, passing Ephesus, you see that, until he eventually puts in at Miletus.

[6 : 37] That's that map. And it's there. Paul sends a messenger, the 30 miles or so up north to Ephesus, to call the elders to come, because he's got something to say to them before he goes to Jerusalem.

And that's our text. Verses 17 to 35. So you know where we are. No more geography lessons. You don't need your maps anymore. No more places and people and things to get confused about. This is Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders. And I want to say at the outset that I've been moved by this text.

I'd never studied this text before. And I feel as though I just discovered a treasure trove. I don't know why I'd never really looked at this text before.

And if I ever get to set my own preaching schedule, then I'm doing a four, maybe five part series on this address. But see, I'll spare you that.

[7 : 47] And I'm just going to cover the ground and deal with it in overview. And I'll just choose a few things to draw out and talk about in detail. But just the fact that Paul would go to the trouble to give this message to the elders personally and that Luke, you see, would pause in this fast-paced narrative.

Look at all that happened in the first 16 verses. And then Luke pauses to record this long speech of Paul. That makes these words wonderful to me. And I think Luke records them in part because they show so much of the apostles' heart.

This may be the most personal you'll ever find Paul in the New Testament. We see here a man who's vulnerable, who's meditative, who's steady in his purpose.

I want you to capture the image of Paul in this text because we're given a tremendous window into this man's heart. All right.

We're going to take this address in three sections. So if you're a note-taker, this is your big moment. First, verses 17 to 27, we get Paul's example.

[9 : 03] And then verses 28 to 31, we get Paul's exhortation. And then verses 32 to 38, we get Paul's exit.

His example, his exhortation, and his exit. There's not been enough alliteration around here recently. Warms your heart, doesn't it?

We begin then. Paul's example. Verses 17 to 27. Now I offer two other framing thoughts. First, I'm not going to address the question of how the term elder, as it's used here in this text, relates to the various governing structures of the church.

I'm just going to use leaders and elders interchangeably and leave it at that. Second, I'm going to make several applications along the way here, not just to leaders in the church, for leaders in the church for sure, but also for all of us as individuals.

And you might think as I do that, well, but Paul's just addressing the elders here, the leaders in the church. And that's true. He is. But Hebrews 13, 7 says, remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God, and imitate their faith.

[10 : 21] And I take that to mean to imitate their way of life as they live out their faith. So, I'll make applications for all of us from time to time here, even if you're not the exact parallel to elders in this

text.

Okay? Now here we go. Verse 17. Paul sends for the elders. Verse 18. The elders come, and he begins, you yourselves know how I lived among you all the time from the first day serving the Lord. Now you look at this speech and you realize that the first half of it is autobiographical. Up to verse 28, it's Paul talking about Paul.

And it's Paul putting himself out there as an example to these leaders of the church in Ephesus. That seems bold to us, but Paul did this kind of thing. 1 Corinthians 4, he says, I urge you, be imitators of me.

1 Corinthians 11, he says, be imitators of me as I am of Christ. Paul imitated Christ, so now here he holds out his own life as an example of the kind of leadership the church needs and the kind of life to some degree that we all will live as servants of God.

[11:44] And none of us are the Apostle Paul, and I realize that, but there are principles here to apply. Now Paul's example is going to go two ways. He'll spend time looking back at what he did, he'll spend time looking forward at what he's going to do.

But the whole section, it's my thesis, I guess, here, the whole section can be understood to explain what it means to serve the Lord.

That's what Paul said he did in verse 18, leading off, serving the Lord. That's what we do as Christians. Certainly that's what church leaders do, we serve the Lord.

So what does it mean? Verse 19, Paul says, you know how I lived among you, he's looking back here, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials.

Three things. First on the list, serving the Lord means humility. Could be translated lowliness. Meaning what?

[12:52] I think Paul means two things. First, if you're humble, you feel toward God that he has absolute rights in your life to do with you as he pleases. You have a spirit of yieldedness to the Lord.

Now where do I get that? Look at verse 22. Paul begins to talk in verse 22 about his future. And look at what he says. He says, I'm going to Jerusalem.

Why? Because he's bound in the Spirit to do so. It's where God wants him. And Paul says, I don't know what shall befall me there.

Except he did know something, verse 23, except that the Holy Spirit testifies that imprisonment and afflictions await me there. Just accept that.

I do know that. Paul's yielded to God. To go where God tells him to go. No matter what's waiting for him when he gets there.

[13:56] And then here's the key statement, verse 24. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself if only I may accomplish my course in the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus.

And I'm suggesting that that's humility right there. Do with me and take me and use me for your purposes, God. God. Would that we just even get a little foothold.

Just a little foothold in verse 24. I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself.

And the key's there in those words to myself. Right? It's easy to misread this. Paul's not saying his life's worthless. worthless. He's saying his life has value.

It is precious but not because it's fundamentally valuable or precious to himself but because his life is lived in service to God to accomplish God's purposes.

[15:05] That's what gives him value. That's what makes his life precious. That's what Paul's living for in his heart of hearts to do what Christ would have him do.

Do. So I ask you in your heart of hearts what are you living for?

I mean what drives you in your daily life? Does verse 24 ring true? Can you say those words and mean them? What makes you tick?

I'm tick. I'm 29 years old. You know what makes a lot of 29 year olds tick?

I'm watching them. Friends from high school and college and there's a whole lot of them who are giving themselves heart and soul to the pursuit of success.

[16:09] I mean they're career driven. They're get to the top driven. They're get yourself as financially secure as you can as soon as you possibly can and start investing and plan it all out so that what?

What's the end game of that road? At least for some of them. For most of them. Leisure. A life of increasing pleasure seeking.

Retirement even. I had a teller at the bank the other day. Went to the bank deposited a check. This teller asked me are you saving for retirement yet? I said saving for retirement? I said I'm just hoping my student loans are paid off before I die.

And she said well what did you study? I said well biblical exegesis.

[17:16] She didn't know what to say to that. Don't think there's a projected income bracket for that degree. Right? Now I'm not anti-saving.

Probably should be saving more than I am. I'm not against working hard at your job or doing well with it. But if in your heart of hearts no matter how old you are what's driving you is the pursuit of some kind of security that lets you just swim in a sea of pleasure until you die then you're living your life to yourself.

And that's the question. Is your life precious to yourself? Or is it valuable because it's lived in service to the Lord?

No matter what job you do. No matter how wealthy or poor you are. Now I think too that by humility Paul means also that we're humble and lowly in relation to others because the humble person knows that God's merciful in his life, in her life.

And so who am I to go around acting as if the world owes me something all the time, right? That's the point of Paul's example isn't it? He wasn't after money. He wasn't after a lucrative lifestyle.

[18:40] He lived to help the weak he says. You want leaders who live like that. Yield it to God.

Humble towards others. And not just leaders. Examine your own heart. See whether you serve the Lord with humility. Second thing Paul says now. Back to verse 19.

You see I'm kind of taking these and reading forward into the text and pulling them out. Verse 19 again. Paul says serving the Lord means tears. This is important for Paul.

He repeats it essentially in verse 31. He says, For three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. tears. Tears. Tears come for many reasons.

Could be joy. Could be pain. Sorrow. Frustration. A sense of burden. Verse 31 suggests Paul had tears of yearning for people to grow in faith and holiness because he says he admonished them with tears.

[19:42] That means he warned them. He urged them to cease improper conduct. That's what the verb means. Paul so longed for them to be holy that he wept night and day over them.

Now verse 19 doesn't say what it is that made him cry. But if verse 31 can be a clue then let me suggest it at least means that Paul was so involved in people's lives that he just had to cry a lot. Because that's what happens when you really care about people's struggles for faith and truth and holiness.

And that one gets me. Because I can manage to go along without crying that way pretty easily. And maybe some of you need to confront the fact that you've trained yourself for years not to cry.

And you've gotten real good at just keeping people's actual needs at a distance from your own heart and nothing moves you anymore. And if that's the case, then break out of that way of life.

[20:59] Because if your life's just a well-managed safe zone, like a bubble, and you've got all things set up so you don't ever really have to engage with people's real needs, and you just stay busy, busy, busy all the time, and you get lots of stuff done, and your life is like a well-oiled machine, but it means you're not engaged with people and their real needs, then hear me, you're not living a life of service to the Lord.

Lord, imitate Paul, open yourself to other people's lives and their struggles, learn to cry, because you long for them to grow in faith and holiness.

You want leaders who cry. And I hope you know how to cry for others as well.

Third thing then, back in verse 19, serving the Lord means trials. See it there? Paul specifically says his trials came through the plots of the Jews, but the point's not that it's the Jews per se.

Paul had troubles with the Gentiles too. The point is that the same kind of trials that Paul endured, these elders would also have to endure, because in serving the Lord, it's inevitable that at some point you face trials.

[22:23] And Paul knows he's got more coming, right? We saw that verse 23, imprisonment and afflictions. That's what he knows is coming. Doesn't stop his service. He can deal with trials.

You want leaders who can deal with trials and who are willing to endure them and who even count them as joy, as James says. And you need to be ready for them in your own lives.

And I know many of you are already experiencing trials or you have experienced significant trials because of your service to the Lord. Now we're in verse 20 now.

There's one more thing I want to say about serving the Lord. There's actually lots more I could say. There's one more thing I'm going to use to sum it all up. Verse 20. Paul says, verse 20, he did not shrink from declaring anything that was profitable and teaching in public, testifying to Jews and Greeks of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me just take all of that and put it into this, that serving the Lord means boldness, courage. Paul did not shrink from declaring and teaching publicly the word of repentance and faith.

[23 : 38] And then verse 27, if you look ahead, is the parallel here. Same language. I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

God. I've got a sermon waiting in the wings for this one. The whole counsel of God, Paul says, even the hard parts, even the offensive parts, even the parts that get you in trouble, we declare all of it. And Paul's going to keep doing that. He says so at the end of verse 24. He says, as I go on, I'll keep testifying to the gospel of the grace of God.

Unless you think that's not all that important, really. Paul drops a bombshell in verse 26. Look at that verse. I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of you all.

Four. Why is Paul innocent? For I did not shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God. To be innocent of the blood means, I think, from other phrases and acts, that Paul's innocent when it comes to his responsibility for the eternal destiny of these Ephesian elders.

[24 : 52] This is heavy stuff. No time to develop it just to say this. Church leaders must proclaim the whole counsel of God, lest we be guilty of the blood of others.

There are huge implications there. Just take the educational ministry of the church. What does it mean for that to what we teach our children, to what we teach our high school students, to what we teach our adults?

It could say a lot there. Brothers and sisters, you want leaders who don't hold anything back. And note, too, that this word goes to everyone, not just ourselves, publicly, house to house, Paul says. It ought to characterize the church, it ought to characterize our own lives, this courage to speak of faith and repentance and the plan of God. This is Paul's example, a life of lowliness and tears and trials and courage as he taught them the counsel of God.

And that's exactly how he'll keep serving the Spirit as he goes forward. Paul's time with the Ephesians is done. And he brought these elders to Miletus because he's concerned that there be leaders in the church who pick up where he left off and they teach and they pray and they care like he did because if they don't, you see, if they don't do that, given what Paul says next, the church won't survive.

[26 : 29] We're at Paul's exhortation now. This is going to be much quicker. Verses 28 to 31. That was Paul's example. This is Paul's exhortation.

In these verses, Paul tells the Ephesian elders how crucial their role is in the survival and the health of the church. He gives a general command and then he applies it two ways. Where's the command?

Right there, verse 28. You see the shift? Paul says, take heed. You might say, be on guard. And then glance to verse 31, the end of this section.

Paul says, therefore, be alert. They're not the same verb, but the ideas are similar. Paul's calling them to a constant state of attention. Be awake. Be open-minded.

Be watchful. Why? Because the church is always threatened. So the leaders have to watch two things.

[27 : 28] They have to watch themselves, and they have to watch the flock. Take heed to yourselves. Could mean watch over one another, leaders.

Could mean watch over your own self. Watch over your own heart, and doctrine, and behavior. I think it means both. The leaders watch out for one another, and they watch out for themselves, individually.

And then Paul applies it to the flock. And it's very clear here that it's the duty of the overseers to care for the sheep. Notice that these elders are to take heed to all the flock, it says.

It's very intentionally all the flock. Not just the healthy ones. Not just the faithful ones.

The lost ones, too. The ones who are sick. And let me just say, I find that to be an overwhelming charge.

[28 : 31] charge. And it should have implications for how we structure church ministry.

And frankly, I think it ought to make us stop and ask, if we're honest, in a church like St. John's, how we intend to fulfill a command like that in our ministry.

Because from my perspective, that's a real challenge in this church. How it is that we ever hope to take heed of all of you. Every one of you.

Would you pray for us that we learn and see how that can be done? Pray for us. Paul's given the command to be alert.

To take heed to themselves. To take heed to the flock. Now why? Why do the elders do this? Let me just highlight the reasons Paul gives. Paul says the elders are to take heed to the flock because the flock cost God the blood of his own son.

[29 : 44] You see that there? Startling verse. Verse 28. Care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own son.

The Greek just says the blood of his own. The RSV says the blood of his son. It's fine. It doesn't matter. It's still the blood of God that pays for the price of the church to come into being.

God died for the church. Now he's giving it over to you elders, leaders. Take good care of it. You get that? Another reason take heed of the flock.

Also verse 28 earlier in the verse because the leaders of the church are chosen to do the work by God himself. You see that? Take heed to the flock in which the Holy Spirit's made you overseers. The Spirit chooses the overseers of the flock. Another reason. Want one more? I mean that should do it, right? There's one other one. The elders take heed to the flock because great danger always waits for the flock.

[30 : 46] Verses 29 and 30. After my departure, wolves will come in from among you, not sparing the flock and from among your own cells will arise men speaking perverse things to draw the disciples away.

It's sobering because it's not just wolves from the outside. There'll be some who aspire to leadership who are wolves in sheep's clothing and they'll just slowly begin to speak twisted and distorted things about the truth.

Just twist it a little bit. And by doing so start leading people astray and decimate the flock. watch for it, Paul says.

Take heed. Be alert. Paul's exit. He's given them his example.

He's exhorted them. Now it's time to go. Not an easy departure. And in his final words we see that Paul's concern finally is for them.

[31 : 51] He commits the church to their care. So who cares for the elders? Verse 32. And now I commend you. Meaning I entrust you to God.

And to the word of his grace which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are being sanctified. Paul commits them into God's hand. God cares for his shepherds, Paul says, by the word of his grace.

Now of course all the flock have God as their shepherd and all the flock are fed on the word. But there's a difference, right? This is my last point.

Hang with me. To the flock God gives the overseer who teaches the whole counsel of God. You have the overseer to teach you.

The flock is led by the word but as the shepherd delivers the word. But the shepherd has the responsibility of searching out and teaching the counsel of God. In other words, when Paul commends the elders to the word, it's a commitment to a responsibility.

[32 : 55] The flock can go to the shepherd for feeding. The shepherd has to prepare the food first hand. And that process of going to the word to prepare the food is where the shepherd is built up and sanctified so that he receives inheritance.

the kingdom, eternal life. Not really that different from how individual Christians inherit eternal life, just a different step in the process I think. So Paul commits the leaders into the care of God and his word and he commits them to something that builds in them, something that sanctifies them and their lives to bring them to the final inheritance.

And if that's the inheritance that's ours, brothers and sisters, and your inheritance too, then what does it mean for our lives? Just this, that like Paul, we covet no money, we don't seek a life of

leisure, we're eager to help the weak because we actually do and can believe what Jesus says, that it's more blessed to give than to receive.

That's Paul's whole life and ministry in a nutshell. hell. And that's Paul's farewell address.

And now it's on to Jerusalem. May these words shape the leaders of this church and each of our lives. Amen.

[34 : 27] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Let us join in prayer. In a more modern translation than the one we've looked at this morning, Paul says in verse 24, I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.

Father, we've seen in the past weeks the motivation and single mind-mindedness of Olympic athletes. We've seen their determination to finish the race, even with broken ribs, even with the death of a friend or family member.

Paul's life, too, is a picture of utter dedication and discipline of body and mind. Lord, as we admire the athletes, may we remember, as we've heard this morning, that we are to be spiritual athletes committed to advancing the kingdom of God.

forgive us when we drop back in the race, even drop out of the race, when we are content to be passive onlookers, when we become spiritually flabby.

[36 : 15] Father, may we be part of the race and run to win. Lord, in your mercy.

Some of us, Father, have been engaged in the race for many years. Help us, like Paul, not to slow our pace, not to retire from our spiritual journey.

But as our years advance, as the finishing line draws closer, show us new areas of service where we can make a difference.

Spare us, we pray, from the indulgence of serving too much our own pleasures, vacations, and hobbies, at the cost of serving our brothers and sisters and a needy world.

Others of us are early in the race, not sure where the future will take us. Lord Jesus, give those near the beginning of the race a strong mind and body.

[37 : 39] A joyful sense of the Spirit's direction in mission and ministry. And deliver them from the temptations and distractions of the world.

Lord, in your mercy. And now, Father, we think of your needy world.

Lord, we pray for Haiti. And think especially this morning of Haiti. Jesus, we pray for Haiti, a country in ruins beneath corruption, poverty, storms and earthquakes.

Yet we hear of resilient people. Yet we hear of resilient people, of public prayers and hymn singing in the open air. Lord Jesus, as you showed your love for the poor and destitute, we pray for Haiti. we thank you for the generosity of many countries and individuals that food and water are reaching the people.

[38 : 53] We offer praise for the public testimony of believers living in tents in a failed state and yet stating that God is good.

may their witness bear much fruit. We pray for Dave Carter as he conducts post-traumatic stress counseling.

Father, sustain the staff he works with at the Kiskeia Disaster Relief Center. Shield them from exhaustion as they work flat out.

Lord, spare the tent cities from disease as the rains come and there is inadequate sanitation. Lord, may many angels embrace that suffering nation.

Lord, in your mercy. Jesus, we turn to our own Anik parishes. We remember our leaders, Trevor, Stephen, Simon, David and Dan and their fellow workers that your love, protection and wisdom may be all sufficient for them.

[40 : 19] We pray especially today for St. Matthias and St. Luke following their vestry meeting and for care for their leader, Simon.

Lord, we petition for a godly resolution to the ongoing dispute with the Diocese of New Westminster. And we pray for the many Christians in the diocesan churches that you will show them a faithful way forward in their time of dismay.

Lord, we bring before you our own with particular needs and challenges. We pray for the power of love, whether our family disputes.

We pray for good news for those seeking employment. We pray for clarity for those unsure of their vocation.

We pray for confidence in the resurrection of Jesus for those near life's end. Lord, we pray for the Lord. We pray for the Lord.

[41 : 35] We pray for the Lord. We remember especially Ken and Gail, Marguerite, Harold, Rowena, David and Bronwyn, Audrey, Jane and her family and the Winram family as they mourn the loss of their father, Jack.

Lord, in your mercy. Amen.