

Acts 20:28-32 - A Precious Bride with a Powerful Savior

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

This is a special Sunday for us, a little bit unusual. A dozen or so of you have already commented on our suits. Thank you for telling us how nice we look.

I know this is not exactly what you're used to every Sunday. Some of you have noticed already that there's not as much room for notes on the back of your bulletin for sermon notes.

You're distressed. You usually have so much you want to write down and the sermon's going to be shorter today. We're even, you don't believe that, do you? It is.

We're even leaving the book of Ephesians for a Sunday. We're in a series there and we're taking a break. This is a special Sunday in the life of our church where we get to ordain and install new officers and we're thrilled about that.

[1 : 03] But we're going to be in the book of Acts today. Acts chapter 20 at verse 28. We haven't completely left Ephesus behind today. These are actually Paul's words, his parting words to the Ephesian elders, the elders of the church that we've been reading the letter to.

He's telling them goodbye. This is a church he started, that he loves, and he's speaking to the whole church, particularly here to their elders. Listen to God's inerrant, infallible word.

Acts 20 at verse 28. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.

Therefore, be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. Pray with me.

[2 : 23] Pray with me. Father, these are your words. We are your people. And we ask you that you would teach us this morning.

Would these not just be words that we read and hear? Father, my words in themselves are simply the words that a man would speak. Would your spirit make them much more?

Would he take your word and apply it to our hearts? That we might indeed be the kind of people that you mean for us to be? The kind of church that you have created us and called us to be?

Father, that would be the desire of our hearts. Would you do that work by your spirit? We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. This weekend, of course, was Valentine's Day weekend.

There are many cultural practices surrounding courtship and marriage. Some that are unique to our society. Some that are more commonly practiced around the world.

[3 : 27] One of those that I remember experiencing was the moment of asking her father. You may have had that moment, some of you guys. I remember going to Christy's hometown and taking her parents out for dinner one night with the express intent of having the conversation with them.

I was very nervous. My palms were sweaty. I had a long speech prepared. I delivered that pretty shortly after we sat down.

I wanted to tell them how much I loved their daughter. How precious and valuable and important she was to me. All of those things. And so I told them all of those wonderful things I had prepared in my speech.

And I got to the end of it. And her father said, if you're asking for my daughter's hand. And I thought, that's exactly what I was thinking you were hearing for the last several minutes.

And it wasn't the last time that I spoke too long and people got confused. That's happened a couple of times since then. Y'all are so mean.

[4 : 37] And he said, my answer would be yes, if that's what that just was. He had a few other questions and we talked for a while.

But many other cultures have conversations that go somewhat similar to that. In some cultures, that conversation includes what's called a bride price. And I'm not going to necessarily commend some of the implications of this.

But for a beautiful woman of high social standing with lots of education. In some countries, hundreds of thousands of dollars can be paid in that conversation in order to marry that bride.

The groom shows how much he values her by the high price he's willing to pay in order to marry her. How precious.

How valuable is the church to her groom. What is he willing to pay to live in relationship with her? Verse 28.

[5 : 43] The church of God which he obtained. How? With his own blood. A higher price has never been paid.

His own blood in order to have his bride. Jesus said his people, his sheep, hear his voice. And they know him.

That he lays down his life willingly for the sheep. He knew what it would take for them to be his. And he willingly paid it. Isn't that amazing?

Willingly he paid it. How precious must we be to Jesus? Jesus. It was the price required, wasn't it? Because of our wanderings and our failures.

Not his. The story of the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, individually and corporately, is of an adulterous, unfaithful bride.

[6 : 43] One who wanders away. We had earned death. Chosen our own ways and our own paths. We had muddied ourselves on the filth of this world, hadn't we?

But the story of the Bible is also one of an undeterred, absolutely always faithful groom. And so when the price required to bring us back, to make us clean, was someone's death.

When it was said that blood had to be shed in order for sins to be forgiven and people to be cleansed. He was all in. He was willing to pay it.

He would pay it. And the price wasn't, Peter tells us, silver or gold. It wasn't with perishable things like that. Material possessions like silver or gold.

That we were redeemed from the way of life that we had wandered off in. It was the precious blood of Christ. A lamb without blemish or defect.

[7 : 43] The perfect son of God giving his life for us. Do you ever feel worthless? Overlooked?

Neglected? Like someone couldn't possibly care for you? You really don't matter in the grand scheme of things. No one would really care if you were gone.

Have others hurt you? Made you feel rejected? Ashamed? Unworthy of their love, attention, or effort? You need to remember the high price your God paid to have you as His own.

To reclaim your heart. He didn't just do it impersonally. Your name, the Bible tells us, is written on the palm of His hand. He did it for you. I've told some of you when we're taking communion before, that if you were the only sinner in the whole world, it would require the blood of Jesus to pay your penalty.

The other thing that's true is that if you were the only sinner in the whole world, Jesus would have paid that price willingly. Because He loves you that much.

[9 : 00] That's how much your Savior loves you. That's how precious you are to God. He loves you that much. He loves His church that He purchased with His own blood.

The picture of Jesus that we need to see when we're feeling worthless and neglected and undesirable is the one that John saw in Revelation 5. We started our service with it as the call to worship.

It's a lamb standing as if slain. He is the one who has purchased people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation to gather His bride together.

And as you keep reading in Revelation about this lamb who was slain, there's all of a sudden before Him a great multitude. The bride of Christ that He's gathered together, no one can count them.

It's His bride dressed in beautiful white robes. And how? How is it that Revelation tells us the church stands before her groom dressed in white robes?

[10:00] It's because they've washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. In His blood, He's washed them and made them clean.

Dear Christian, you're His treasured possession. We are His treasured possession. A people for His own. The ones for whom the Father would send the Son.

The ones for whom the Son would willingly lay down His life. He has not forgotten you. You're precious to Him. Imagine if at the point in your life where you felt most worthless and undesirable, someone scraped and sacrificed and gathered together enough money to give you a ring.

To say, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to enter into relationship with you. That kind of act would at least begin to rewrite the story of worthlessness that you've been telling yourself that's in your own heart, wouldn't it?

It would begin to do that. Imagine if rather than a ring, if rather than someone sacrificing just some money, He sacrificed His life to save you and to live in relationship with you.

[11:16] That kind of love really does begin to rewrite our story, to give us a new narrative of who we are, a completely new identity because of who He is and what He's done for us.

We have an identity as precious to Jesus. He has not forgotten us. We are precious to Him. There's a particular gravity for that this morning, especially for our new officers, of thinking of how precious the church is.

I remember one of my seminary professors whom I love, Jack Collins. He used to warn us young, prideful, overconfident seminary guys of what we could do with God's Word and ways that we would hurt or abuse the flock.

Ways that we would mislead people. Things we could do that would hurt them. And he would regularly get emotional and tearful and warn us not ever to do whatever it was in that moment that he was concerned about.

And he would say, don't you ever do that to Jesus' precious blood-bought lambs. You're going to them. Don't you dare treat them that way.

[12:31] In a sense, the marvel of today is that Jesus would take such a precious bride whom He loves so much and place her hand in yours this morning and say, officer, take good care of my church.

The one I bought with my own blood. Take care of that one. You'll feel the weight of that probably even more today than you have before.

Of being asked to care for something so precious to someone else. Because that is indeed the first thing that the high price shows us is how valuable and precious the church is to her Savior.

But that's not all we notice when we think about the high bride price that's paid for the church. When you pay a high bride price, it's not merely to communicate how precious and valuable the bride is, but also how strong and capable the groom is.

That's a big part of what's being communicated as well. It's why I got asked at the restaurant that night one of the most common questions for a guy to get asked in that setting. How are you going to take care of her?

[13:50] How are you going to provide for her? It's why I had in my pocket that night a copy of a budget for the first year of our marriage. Because I was that anxious to show to her.

Thankfully, I didn't have to use it. But it was there just in case things got dicey. I wanted him to know how much I loved his daughter and how capable I was of caring for her.

I wanted to show myself as strong and capable that I intended to provide for her. In many cultures, that's the primary thing that a bride price is communicating.

The glory and strength of the groom. It's a display of his power and his resources. And so in this text, we see not only how precious the church is, but also how powerful her Savior is.

After those verses where Paul challenges the elders to care faithfully for the flock, he says this, verse 32. Now I commend 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 sanctified.

[15:01] You've been given a tall task, a great charge, a high calling. And Paul says, do it well. And now, I commend you to God and His word and His grace.

He is the one who has the power to bring you through to the end of the mission. That's the word there that we have translated is able to. It's the word for power, for dynamite.

The word is that God is powerful, that He is strong and capable. It's one of the words we saw recently in Ephesians when we were talking about the immeasurable greatness of His power

according to the working of His great might, the resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead. You remember that in Ephesians? The one that had Jesus exalted above every power and principality and authority? That kind of power? That's the power that God has.

The power that has Him reigning over everything for His church. That power. He has that kind of power to bring us through from the wolves of outside, from the deceivers of inside, and present us perfect at the end of it all.

[16:16] That's what Jesus is doing, isn't it? Ephesians tells us that. That He shows us how He's going to care for us not only in giving His life and paying that high price to have us, but that He continues to cleanse us, washing us with water, with the Word, until He presents us how?

Holy and blameless, above reproach, without blemish. Did you catch that? He doesn't stop at giving His life that one time, does He?

He's not through then. He keeps doing that work all the way until the end. He never lets His bride go. That may be my favorite part of this whole passage in Acts.

Paul seems to be heaping all this weighty responsibility all on the shoulders of these elders that he's talking to. Be careful. Protect her. Take care of her.

She's precious. And then he says these words of grace. He finishes by saying when God puts her hand in yours, He never lets go either.

[17:25] He doesn't hand her off and turn His back. He puts her hand in yours and then He puts His hand around both of yours. It's not, I'll leave you to it. Good luck.

It's a big deal. But I commend you to God. You're not on your own. You're still entrusted to Him. The One who is able to see you through to your full sanctification and inheritance. He's the One who's able to do that. So you never shepherd Christ's church on your own.

He never lets her out of His sight. How else would you have any hope? You're weak. You mess up. You'd be sure to break His precious possession. You'd blow it.

But there's hope for you, officer, because you never care for Christ's bride on your own. There's another picture of Jesus in the book of Revelation that this reminds me of.

[18:22] It's in Revelation chapter 1 where Jesus, who's described one like a son of man, is pictured in beautiful imagery as powerful and wise.

White hair, fiery eyes, bronze feet. He holds in His hand seven stars. And He walks around among seven golden lampstands.

Now in itself, that picture of Jesus holding seven stars, it does give us a little bit of an idea of the power and the majesty that He must have to hold those stars. But it may not mean much to you until you're told at the end of the chapter that the seven stars stand for the angels, the leaders, the representatives of the seven churches.

And the seven lampstands stand for the churches themselves. He's holding those churches in His hand and walking around among them. He holds all of us in His hand.

He walks among us. He will never let go of us or leave us to ourselves. Friends, where do you feel weak or vulnerable? What situation makes you fearful?

[19:34] Is it one where it's unfamiliar? Where you're feeling alone or incapable of handling it? Is it the words of a naysayer from recently or from long ago that have you discouraged and afraid?

The picture of Jesus we need to see is the glorious, exalted Savior holding the seven stars in His hand. The one who will fight for us.

The one who will sustain us. The one who promises the gates of hell will not prevail against us that He's that strong. You may look up here on this stage some Sunday mornings and see your pastors and know some of our frailties and begin to be fearful.

You may look up here this morning at men being ordained to elder and deacon and you may know their weaknesses and be concerned. You need to see beyond these men to the powerful God behind them.

It is He, verse 28 says, who has called them to care for His bride. He has called them. Even as He is most fully aware of all of their weaknesses, He has called them.

[20:51] Southwood, your trust is not in a few new elders or deacons this morning. Your trust is in a powerful Savior who holds all of them and all of us in His hand.

Amen? Your trust is in a Lamb who would give His life for you because you're precious to Him.

Amen? He is powerful for us and we are precious to Him.

Let's pray. Father, we need to believe that we struggle because we so prefer to be strong on our own.

It's easy to put our trust in princes, in mortal men who cannot save when You indeed are strong and mighty and have saved and continue to save.

Father, would we see You this morning as strong and mighty? Would we see our Bridegroom Jesus Christ glorious and exalted? Would we get great joy from that and great joy in celebrating together how He is caring for His church?

[22 : 04] Father, would that be the joy of our hearts even during these next few minutes we ask in His name. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.