

Acts 20:17-38 - History in the Making

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Preacher: Guest: Billy Spink

[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.

Amen. Thank you all. There are a lot of people here this morning who've known me a long time. That's exciting and fun for me.

One who's known me longer than almost all of those is my dad, who is here to open God's Word for us this morning.

I got to introduce you to him this summer when he preached and told you then that he is not only the one from whom I learned what it meant to be a man and a husband and a father, but also learned of the love of God for me and of what it looks like to share that love with others.

He's been my pastor since I was born. I guess it kind of works that way. And delighted that he is here to open God's Word for us this morning.

[1 : 01] Billy Spink. I always marvel at how the service fits together, and I had nothing to do with the selection of that offertory, but I think it was chosen for me.

I need thee every hour, and I certainly need the Lord's help as we move forward in this service. It's a special occasion for us as a family.

Many of us have gathered to celebrate with you as Will is installed here, and it's a special joy for us to be able to be together with you at Southwood today, and especially for me to be able to open God's Word to you this morning.

I would invite you to turn in your Bibles or in the Pew Bible to the book of Acts chapter 20, and I've picked somewhat of an awkward passage to use this morning, but I hope at the end of the sermon you'll realize it's not quite as awkward as it might at first appear.

We are making history today, and it's a rare opportunity for us to actually say that we are a part of history.

[2 : 16] History is such a special thing, and most of it happens before our time or after our time or somewhere else, but rarely do we feel like we are actually making history.

But we are. History is marked by special dates, dates that are remembered because of special occasions. Let me get some audience participation here for a moment.

How many of you recognize the date October 31, 1517? October 31, 1517.

That's not Halloween. That is when the Reformation was essentially started through Martin Luther's work.

How about July 4, 1776? Anybody kind of recognize? Oh, yeah, I figured we'd get a few that would know that. How about in Huntsville, Alabama, the date of July 21, 1969?

[3 : 20] Ah, okay, when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon. How about December 2, 1972?

December 2, 1972. The famous Punt Bama Punt Iron Bowl. Now, I just thrilled some of you and the rest of you have just left.

September 11, 2001. We all recognize that date. February 14, 2016. February 14, 2016.

A day that will go down in history, at least Southwood history, as the beginning of a new chapter in your church's ministry.

Imagine you're holding in your hand a book that tells the history of Southwood Presbyterian Church. Well, today you move into a new chapter in that book.

[4 : 33] What names will be included in this chapter? What events will be described? Whose weddings or baptisms will be celebrated? Will a revival come to Southwood and to Huntsville and to this presbytery during this chapter?

What staff will be added? What new faces will appear in the Southwood family portrait? What ministries will be offered to children and youth and men and women?

Only God knows the answer to those questions. But isn't it exciting to think that we are on the cusp of history today? We are opening a new chapter of ministry at Southwood Presbyterian Church. Now, if you're interested in thinking about church ministry and church growth, there are lots of books waiting for your attention. Everyone seems to have his opinion about what to do and what not to do.

What to sing and what not to sing. What to preach and what not to preach. Some will suggest that to reach the world, the church must be more of a reflection of the world.

[5 : 42] Others will vehemently disagree with that statement. What I would like to do this morning is let the Scriptures be our guide to the type of ministry God desires to see in the local church.

This local church. Acts 20 tells the story of the church at Ephesus. The Apostle Paul had been there for three plus years.

He had ministered effectively there, but compelled by the Holy Spirit, he is moving on to Jerusalem. So as he bids them farewell, he calls for the elders to gather and he shares his heart with them.

And this is what happens. Acts 20 verse 17. Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them, you yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

How I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[7 : 05] And now behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

But I do not count my life of any value nor as precious to myself. If only I may finish my course in the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

And now behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

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.

[8 : 20] And 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. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.

You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus how he said himself, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

And when he had said these things he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all. They embraced Paul and kissed him being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken that they would not see his face again.

And they accompanied him to the ship. Let's pray together. Father, these are your words and we believe they are living and active sharper than any two-edged sword and we pray that by your Holy Spirit you would take the truth contained therein and write it upon our hearts and minds as this new chapter of history at Southwood Presbyterian Church unfolds that it would unfold according to your words prescription and not our own desires.

Do a mighty work here we pray, oh God. To your glory through Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. There is plenty in this text.

[9 : 48] It's a very long text and there is plenty that we could spend lots of time on but I would like to take from this text four principles that I feel are critical for the next phase of history for Southwood Presbyterian Church.

Four things that I believe the word of God would tell you that you need to remember as you move forward and make the kind of history that brings glory to God. The first of those is that we are to be alert to the reality of spiritual warfare.

And I had to decide which of these principles to put first and I didn't originally plan to put this first but I thought this provides the context. This provides the environment. This establishes the climate in which everything else comes and it is my friends that ministry happens in the midst of spiritual warfare.

My wife and I enjoy receiving our monthly copy of Branches. We love to see and read about what's going on here at Southwood and it is really a wonderful place to be whether it's Trunk or Treat or a Half K or Falla Lodge or Hay Day.

If I were living in Huntsville this is where I'd be. You all know what it is to have a really good time. But don't forget that true biblical ministry is done in the context of spiritual warfare.

[11 : 15] It is a battle to do ministry not a picnic. Paul didn't know exactly what would happen when he left Ephesus but he says I know this verse 29 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.

He says I can't tell you what's going to happen specifically but I know this I know this from the outside and from the inside ministry is going to be all about spiritual warfare.

It may be the consequence of disobedience or it may be in the very midst of obedience but it will come. Adam and Eve didn't have to wait long before the tempter came to them.

The Lord Jesus began his ministry in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. Paul will later write a letter back to these Ephesians in which in the 6th chapter he will talk about what?

Spiritual warfare and the armor of God. In fact in this particular passage he says the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

[12 : 35] Spiritual ministry happens in the context of spiritual warfare. Most of us would agree that 9-11 has changed a lot about the way we live.

The threat of terrorism of the unknown the unforeseen the unexpected is now just a way of life for us in this world and safety and security are on our radar all the time.

But if that's how we live in a general way how much more should the church of the Lord Jesus Christ understand that as we move forward in ministry we should expect anticipate prepare for and respond to any form of opposition that should come to us from the outside or again from the inside. Paul wanted the Ephesians to remember that and to tread carefully and prayerfully. I love the words of the hymn lead on O King Eternal the day of March has come henceforth in fields of conquest thy tent shall be our home through days of preparation your grace has made us strong and now O King Eternal we lift our battle song.

May that be the theme of Southwood as it goes forward in the days ahead. Principle number two be convinced of the centrality of the gospel.

[14 : 05] What the heart is to the body the gospel is to the ministry of the church. Neglect your physical heart and you will pay the consequences.

You will reap the benefits or the lack of benefits. Nurture it treasure it preach it live it the gospel and the power of God may be unleashed among you.

Listen to what Paul says in verse 24. He says I don't account my life of any value nor as precious to myself if only I may finish my course in the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Why was he on this planet? Not to accumulate a portfolio of funds and resources and mutual funds? He was on this planet to testify to the grace of God the gospel of the grace of God.

It was the gospel that consumed his focus and his energy it was the gospel that burned in his heart it didn't matter what else he accomplished if he failed to herald the gospel.

[15 : 21] And so when he writes to the Romans he said it's the gospel that's the power of God unto salvation to the Jew first and also to the Greek. When he writes to the Corinthians and he talks about all the issues that they're dealing with in Corinth he says I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

When he writes from a Roman prison to the Philippians he says I'm surrounded by people that speak the gospel from envy or selfishness but hey I rejoice that the gospel is going forth.

And to those same Philippians he says only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ so that whether I come and see you or am absent I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

What a glorious statement to make as those of us who leave town today we go back our separate ways we say I pray that you will stand arm in arm side by side hand in hand for the message of the gospel.

Sometimes we take the gospel for granted and act as if we can graduate from gospel application to deeper things and higher things. I can assure you when we think that way the devil smiles.

[16:47] Principle number three never forget the identity of the people you serve. Never forget the identity of the people that surround you. Look around you at the people in this congregation this morning.

Who are they? How many times do we distinguish ourselves or identify ourselves by age or vocation or background or college allegiance or something else?

Sometimes we want to be defined by our successes and sometimes unfortunately we are defined by our failures. But in the ministry of God's church all of that is secondary. Paul tells these elders in 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 or purchased with his own blood.

The people around you are a flock. Psalm 100 says we are his people the sheep of his pasture.

Jesus saw people as sheep without a shepherd and he had compassion on them.

He said he was the good shepherd and he would lay down his life for his sheep. Verse 28 says that he would purchase the church of God with his own blood. We are not to be defined by our job or our age or our position or our allegiance to this school or that school.

[18:13] We are to be defined by our relationship to God through the gospel. These sheep about you will need tenderness and patience but they will also need instruction and correction.

They will demand all the time that you can give to them but they will then bless you in ways that you could never anticipate. You know it doesn't really matter where you come from in Huntsville.

What part of Huntsville you've come from today to be here at Southwood. It doesn't matter if you're still an intact nuclear family or whether that family blew up some time ago. It doesn't matter if you appear squeaky clean on the outside or have battle scars on your faces.

When you come through these doors we all come as sinners in need of a savior as sheep in need of a shepherd as broken in need of healing as strugglers in need of help.

The diversity that we see among us is trumped by our common need grace and our common hope Christ. And so Paul said to the Galatians in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith.

[19:24] There is neither Jew nor Greek slave nor free male nor female for you are all one in Christ. To the Corinthians he would say for just as the body is one and as many members and all the members of the body though many are one body so it is with Christ for in one spirit we were all baptized into one body whether Jew or Greek slave or free and all were made to drink of one spirit.

The unity that we have in Jesus Christ trumps all the diversity that would separate us from one another. And Southwood Presbyterian Church needs to move forward with that sense of unity where rich and poor black and white young and old tied and war eagle all find in Jesus Christ a unity that propels you forward in ministry to one another and through this church to the community. Finally principle four remain devoted to the priority of faithful biblical instruction. There are always temptations in ministry to bounce from one contemporary issue to the next to always want to sound relevant and in touch and to make the congregation feel like they're on the cutting edge of current debate.

I confess the fear that I have in my own heart after 34 years in the same place is that someone would describe my ministry as miles wide and inches deep.

Miles wide inches deep. Paul certainly seemed devoted to faithful teaching. He says in verse 20 I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house.

[21:16] I didn't back off from anything whether it was public or private. He says in verse 27 I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

That's a strong statement. The whole counsel of God. There wasn't anything I was afraid to talk about. No issue that I wouldn't raise. He didn't hesitate to demand that people think.

He didn't apologize for apologetics. He valued sound doctrine and he appealed for a response to biblical truth. Notice verse 21 testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He said I pounded that over and over again. Why? Because it is through repentance and faith that one comes into the kingdom and it is true that through repentance and faith one walks and travels in the kingdom.

we cannot assume that a busy church is necessarily a solid church. There are lots of churches today that are keeping their people very busy and very tired but building on a very sandy foundation.

[22 : 38] Theologian David Wells recently examined the weaknesses of today's evangelical church and prescribed some steps toward renewal. Listen to what he says. We must recover the lost word of God.

If we do not recover the sufficiency of the word of God in our time if we do not relearn what it means to be sustained by it nourished by it disciplined by it and unless our preachers find the courage again to preach its truth we will lose our right to call ourselves Protestants.

We will lose our capacity to be the people of God and we will set ourselves on a path that leads right into the old discredited liberal Protestantism. we have to recover a vivid otherworldliness by making ourselves once again captives to the truth of God regardless of the cultural consequences. That is the first thing. May Southwood's reputation be in this next chapter of its history that this is where the word of God is faithfully thoroughly and carefully taught and if people want to come and leave because you take the word of God too seriously let that not distract you from the call to make disciples presenting everyone mature in Christ.

So Paul leaves Ephesus wondering what's going to become of his beloved Ephesian church but he does not wonder without hope.

[24 : 13] In verse 32 it says and now Paul says 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.

He says I commend you to God because after all it is God who bought his church and it's God who builds his church it's God who makes things grow it is God who works in us both to will and to do for his good pleasure it is God who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or imagine it is God who is able to make all grace abound to us Paul says I commend you to God and to the word of his grace not just to the word grace we're great at taking the word grace and throwing it around all the time using it all the time so that it means relatively nothing but Paul says I commend you to the word of his grace for it is the word of his grace that revives the soul and makes wise the simple and rejoices the heart and enlightens the eyes and endures forever it is the word of his grace which is living and active sharper than any two-edged sword the word of his grace does not eliminate spiritual disciplines like prayer and bible study it promotes those disciplines not in a have to mentality but in a want to mentality not to satisfy somebody's list of do's and don'ts but to build a relationship that satisfies you in the

Lord Jesus himself how does that happen because the word of his grace always points us in one direction not to ourselves and not to each other but to the word of grace made flesh the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world the one from whom we have all received grace upon grace God and his word of grace are able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified February 14th 2016 a day in history you were here you were here when it began this new chapter of Southwood Presbyterian Church history is to begin to be written today and I would hope that the pages of this chapter will be stained by the same thing that marked Paul's labor among the Ephesians see if you can detect it Paul said you yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in

Asia serving the Lord with all humility and with tears tears therefore be alert remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears and when he had said all these things he knelt down and prayed with them all and there was much weeping on the part of all as they embraced Paul and kissed him tears you see Paul's warnings were sounded in love the gospel was declared in love the church identity was cultivated in love his instruction was given and received in love the important thing is not ultimately how big Southwood becomes but how deep not what the community thinks about you but how much love the community sees in you not who rises to lead but who bows to serve not how much truth you accumulate but how much love you

demonstrate not even how much recognition you gain in the community but how much glory God receives may this chapter end as Paul's did with tears of joy for all that God did by his power and for his glory in the lives of ordinary people who met an extraordinary savior in the classrooms and hallways and nurseries and youth rooms and sanctuary of Southwood Presbyterian Church and in the hearts of each of you as you begin today to write the next chapter in the history of your church write well my friends write well with the gospel before you let's pray father in heaven thank you for this special day as we mark a new chapter in the history of Southwood Presbyterian Church a history that we are all excited to see develop before us may it be a history that is marked by the gospel of the grace of God may it be a history that is marked by impact for the glory of God and the extension of God's kingdom may it be a history in which ordinary people fall in love with an extraordinary savior and tell the world all about him for we pray this in Jesus name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org