

Session 5 – Preaching a Big God in a Small Place

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[0 : 00] All right, so turn with me to Acts 20, and since we're all getting a little tired and staying while we read the word together.! Acts 20.

I'm going to read Paul's sermon to the Ephesian elders.

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, 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 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.

Now behold, I am going to Jerusalem constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there. Except the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

[1 : 14] 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 I have received from the Lord 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 whom 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 your own cells 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 day and night and day to admonish every one of you in tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

[2 : 31] I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who are with me. In all things, I have shown that by working hard in this way, we must help the weak and remember the words of our Lord Jesus, how he himself said, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

And when he 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. And God bless the preaching of his word. You can take your seats. And we've titled this last session, How Do We Preach a Big God in a Small Place?

Preaching a Big God in a Small Place. You know, I think there's kind of two ways, by way of introduction, two ways to do Christmas shopping. You know, I went to Knoxville, Christmas shopping, all that call, going to Westtown Mall.

I don't know if the malls are as much a thing when you get two-day delivery from Amazon. But Westtown Mall would have all the latest things stocked in. One after another, they would be stocked as soon as all the latest shoes or the latest Stanley mug or whatever it is that everybody wanted this Christmas was stocked.

[3 : 59] And then when it all sold out, it was restocked with all of the same things. And you come back to school or when I was a kid, you know, or you come back after Christmas break and you're reengaging and you're all wearing the same clothes, carrying the same coffee mug.

Why? Because it's been done that way. One of the things I learned after coming to Athens is it's not the only way to do Christmas shopping. A provoking example of living inside the circle is our little

store downtown called Greeks Baring Gifts.

What they do to prepare their shelves every Christmas is not to, you know, scroll through social media on what everyone wants. They go to the markets to buy what their customers want.

And often, you know, I've gone in some late night or last minute shopping there and Kathy Green will say, have you considered this? Hey, I was thinking about what you bought last year.

I think your wife might enjoy this. Totally different. Tune to her clientele. Tune to these people. I think we have a similar opportunity in a small place to preach a big God that's tuned to our people.

[5 : 13] How could preaching in a small place look? How could it be different? I think we read Acts 20 and we're fired up. You know, we're ready to proclaim the gospel of God.

But how could preaching in a small place be different? How should preaching in a small place be different? Yeah, I think this text, there may be no better text in the Bible than this one to be our God.

This is the only speech in the book of Acts. It's recorded that the Apostle Paul made to only Christians. But it's not just Christians. It's just elders of the church in Ephesus, a church that Paul planted.

So it's a gathering just like this of pastors and elders. It's a very personal and very emotional speech. Drips with emotion.

Paul has spent three years teaching the church in Ephesus, planting and building a church there. Now he gathers them one final time in another location after he's been run out of town.

[6 : 15] Gathers them in Miletus and charges them to continue the church God is building there. And I trust he has things to charge us with. So I broke this out in four points and you have those with you.

But firstly, I said just preach sincerely. Preach sincerely. And this final charge of the elders, to the elders of Ephesus, also reminds them of his example of serving the Lord.

You see that threaded through. He says, you yourselves know. You yourselves know. He's not telling them anything that he didn't do among them. You yourselves know. Look down there in verse 18.

He says, you yourselves know how I lived among you. Verse 19, serving the Lord. Later he says in verse 24, that his whole life boils down to finishing the ministry he received.

I do not count my life of any value, nor as precious to myself. If only I may finish my course in the ministry I received from the Lord. That's the same root word for serving used here.

[7 : 19] It's that deacon word. And so what he's saying is staggering. He's saying my life boils down to this assignment from the Lord. To serve him. So often I think we can think about ministry that focuses on how we're serving.

Whether we're using this or that gift. Serving in this or that town. Taking care of this or that responsibility. That we forget that we're serving the Lord. This quite obviously is not a reference to God generically.

But a reference to our Lord Jesus Christ. It's staggering. He says. In other places he says I'm a bondservant. I'm a slave of Christ.

But in verse 24, this might be the most personal and most stirring description of what this reality means to the apostles. I don't account my life of any value nor is precious to myself.

If only I may finish my course in the ministry I receive from the Lord Jesus Christ to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

[8 : 22] And so he's reminding them of how he's serving the Lord. How I serve you. But most importantly, how I serve the Lord among you. He says a number of times that in pointing at his example, reminding them of his example and having that form the framework of his charge.

He calls them to several things. He calls them to preach sincerely. He says in verse 19, he served the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

It seems that after he was forced out of Ephesus because of the riot over Artemis, that they began to talk about him.

And people began to talk and assume that his motives weren't really good motives. He was there to maybe gather a crowd. And then when it didn't work out, he split out of town. So he's defending his ministry that he served them sincerely.

You know how I serve the Lord among you. I came with all humility. He did not seek to win people through his charisma or rhetorical flourish.

[9 : 29] He refused the show, the smoke and the fog. He refused the shenanigan. He refused any way of preaching that caused others to be more impressed with him than impressed with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

All humility. I came with tears. Twice he references his tears and they cry at the end of this. These tears are not the waterworks of manipulation.

They're the blood earnest tears of sincerity. That he cares about their eternal good more than anything else. So much so that he comes with tears.

He says, I came with trials. Now, how does a trial is played into his sincerity? You know, nearly every sermon in the book of Acts, the apostle Paul preaches is interrupted.

How do trials point to his sincerity? Well, trials prove that he's not a coward. He does not shrink from declaring anything that is profitable, regardless of what it might bring upon him.

[10 : 29] Even though it brings trouble upon him. And the Holy Spirit testifies him that persecution and affliction continue to await him.

At the end, he says, I came not for selfish gain. He defends the fact that he did not receive from them. Now, we know from the apostle Paul in different places. He defends pastors being paid for ministry at times.

He himself is remunerated at different times. But there's other times where he refuses money for theological reasons or pastoral reasons. And so he did among them.

And after reminding them of his example, he says to them, to these elders, and says to us, pay careful attention, verse 28, to yourselves. So we've heard a lot about this, so I won't camp out on him, but just pay careful attention to yourself.

Several years ago, in the midst of COVID, my wife and I went down to Dry Tortugas. So the least visited national park in the national park system is called Dry Tortugas.

[11 : 34] It's a string of seven islands, 70 miles west of Cuba, the only safe harbor between Key West and Cuba.

It's called Dry Tortugas because it does not have any fresh water. So it is a place you can stop. And over the days, it was discovered by Ponce de Leon. And it seemed to be a very important place because of its importance in guarding the area down there, the harbor around there.

And so in the 1800s, America built the largest fort on American soil on this Dry Tortugas. Now, it's retired now, and you can go camp at the base of the fort, which is amazing.

And you should all do it. But you would come out in the middle of the ocean and see this massive fort prepared to train 425 cannons.

It had 425 cannons. It was prepared to train 109 cannons on any approaching ship. And I just was asking myself, why build a fort out there?

[12 : 43] And they informed us while we were there was to protect the incredible, valuable Gulf Stream shipping lanes. Even today, so much of our economy comes down the Mississippi and in these lanes.

And so they wanted to guard the economy, guard these lanes. Well, Paul's example is calling us to guard something far more significant. Our hearts, our sincerity, to not compromise the message in the way we preach the message.

Recently, one of my members, I was hanging out at their house, and they asked me, what's the hardest part about being a pastor? And I said, without a doubt, keeping my heart sincere. It's so easy, as we've said, to become a professional pastor, going through the motions of ministry without the sincerity of heart.

It may be the result of focusing too much on the performance or show, seeking to please man. It may be the result of years of disappointment resulting in callousness of heart. It may be the result of neglecting the private, internal aspects of ministry.

He flabble in the book that we gave in the back. He said, believe it, brethren, it is easier to declaim like an order against a thousand sins of others than to mortify one's sin, like Christians and ourselves.

[14 : 00] To be more industrious in our pulpits and in our closets. To preach 20 sermons to our people than one to our hearts. These words are precious reminders. Pay careful attention to yourself.

Keep a close watch on your life. Jeremiah Burroughs said there's only two books you need to know. Even though we talk so much about books, there's only two books you need to know.

The Bible and your heart. You have not. No. How many pastors have you known that have become professional and gradually slipped away?

Obviously, this call to preach sincerely is for every pastor, wherever they serve. But there may be unique advantages to sincerity in a small place. Preach sincerely, point A down there.

Because there is less separation between your life and ministry. We've talked about this already. You know, in a small place, you're living life in a fishbowl. Everyone knows who you are, what you're doing, what you did last night.

[14:59] Even though you may not have said a word to them. You might tell your kids, if you're going to go sin, go sin in another town. You know, don't do it here. You know, I remember a couple months ago, I was aware of this fishbowl reality when I went to get a new license tag for my car.

And unbeknownst to me, oblivious to the old fact, Tennessee had changed their license plate. And you could get one that said, in God we trust. But Tennesseans were mad that it wasn't on every license plate.

And so you had to go to the clerk and you had to ask for that one. Or you just got a blue one without in God we trust. And so I walked up oblivious to this kerfuffle and didn't know what was going on.

But I walked to the clerk lady and gave her my stuff. Never met this lady. She said, oh, I know what license plate you want. And I said, you do.

And then she pulled it out and I saw the, yes, that would be great. Or something like that, you know. It just shows you. She knew I was a pastor and I didn't know her. She knew something about me.

[16:05] And so that's often, you know, it is this reason that failures of ministers in small towns seem to have greater impact. Tear apart families, damage reputation of the church, leave a bitter taste in the mouth.

Who wants to live in a fishbowl? No one. But maybe it's more of an advantage than we think. That's what we've been talking about. In a larger place, there is no fishbowl.

You're just one of the many, one of the masses, one of the number. No one cares how you treat a waitress. Or how you treat your plumber or a grocery store clerk. I remember right until we got here talking to someone in town.

I can't remember where. It's a grocery store. Maybe it's a restaurant or something. And I heard her say something about another master. And what a jerk he was. I was like, whoa.

She hung with me. I don't want that. Why is that happening? Because there's more separate. In a big town, there's more separation. And so there is no fishbowl.

[17:07] In a smaller place, there is. No separation. A little separation. There may be tremendous advantage to that. Your life can commend your ministry. And your ministry can commend your life.

There can be a wonderful connection there. And it's vital. And it strengthens our community. Preach sincerely. Because there's less separation. Preach sincerely. Because there's less disruption to your life and ministry.

Everyone knows that change in a small place is slow. It's because small places don't change that we love them so. Johnny Cash questions that it was Jesus left in that little old hometown.

In our little old hometown. Because it's only there. That Sunday is still sacred. Family is still first. And helping others is still a priority. There's less change. Less transience.

Less development. The upside for pastors is there's less disruption to ministry. There's less people moving in and out. There's less job opportunities taking people away.

[18:07] It means we can play the long game. You know, I think sometimes in pastoral ministry, it can be the race for the biggest splash. How can I make the biggest splash in the least amount of time?

I've got to get my 18 months of sermons and make the biggest splash and make my imprint. Well, we can play the long game if we think like this. We can focus on long-term fruitfulness.

Which is helpful because most of our congregation will grow very, very slowly. So preach sincerely. I love the way 1 Timothy 4 envisions this relationship.

Practice these things. Immerse yourself in them so that all may see your progress. I think it's a wonderful thing. I'm sure, Steve, your church has seen you grow over the years.

It's a wonderful thing when the church is not viewed as something that you're performing for. Trying to get something out of. But a relationship between a pastor and his people.

[19:03] Where we all grow. It's a tremendous gift. Sometimes you think they're afflicted with your sermons from 10 years ago or whatever. But what a tremendous gift.

Practice these things. Immerse yourself so that all may see your progress. This relationship between the congregation and his people. Preach exegetically.

After reminding them of how he preached sincerely, the second aspect of his example of serving the Lord is his commitment to preach exegetically. Paul reminds them again and again of how he proclaimed the gospel and the word of God to him.

Seven times he reminds them how he proclaimed the gospel. Declaring, verse 20. Teaching, verse 20. Testifying, verse 21. Testify, 24. Proclaiming, 25.

Testify, 26. Declaring, 26. The point is clear. The pastor's not called to be creative or innovative. Pastor's not called to be hip or original. Pastor's called to proclaim what they've heard.

[20 : 03] You know, behind this word is this idea of Harold. The one who's just proclaiming news. He's just sent in. He's riding in from out of town to proclaim news about something that has happened that is necessary for you to know.

It's a tremendous gift. There's also this word behind testify and witness. It's this idea of a courtroom. Everyone who hears the gospel is on trial.

We're testifying to the truth about what our Lord has revealed and shown in Jesus Christ. The gospel is a matter of life and death, heaven and hell.

Mercy and judgment. So we proclaim. But I love the emphasis, though, is on what or I love the emphasis that's included on what we proclaim. We proclaim the good news, the kingdom, the whole counsel, the word of his grace.

Good news, the word of his grace pointed the gospel wonderfully. But the kingdom and the whole counsel of God point to something more. They call us to proclaim not just the gospel of God, but also the word of God that upholds and undergirds the gospel, the pattern of sound words that we are to proclaim.

[21 : 13] And so pastor to call to exegesis, to drawing meaning out of a book and proclaiming. I love the way Packer says it here.

Holy scripture is in and of itself preaching. From one standpoint, it is service of God preaching. From another profounder standpoint, it is God himself preaching.

To preach the scriptures is thus no more, just as it is no less, than to acknowledge them for what they are and to let their content be to us what it already is in itself.

The Bible text is the real preacher. And the role of the man in the pulpit or the counseling conversation is simply to let the passages say their peace through him.

I just think that's so helpful. What's the goal for this day? To let the passage say its peace. To let it out. To unleash the mind, like Spurgeon says. So preach exegetically because your people will only be saved, sanctified, and secured through the means of the word of God.

[22 : 14] Jesus says sanctified them in the truth. Your word is true. He's saying sanctify them for the truth that they would be devoted to the truth. But he's also saying sanctify them in the truth.

Build them up, strengthen them, supply all that they need through the truth of God. You know, truth is a four letter word in our culture right now. Truth is so narrow-minded and bigoted, but the loss of truth has not caused us to be more free but more vulnerable.

Not more content but more restless. Not more carefree but more anxious. The word of God alone will save, sanctify, and secure in an anxious age.

And that's what our people need. And they need it from us, not from another podcast. But from the man of God, from the pastor, standing and proclaiming the word of God and the power of the spirit. So draw the meaning out. Preach exegetically. Because your people need a preacher just as much as they need a pastor. You know, I asked how it would be that you think. When I moved to Athens, a pastor asked me, are you a pastor or a preacher?

[23 : 24] I said, well, what do you mean? How would you define a pastor or a preacher? And he said, well, a pastor spends 90% of his time with the people, 10% on his sermon.

The preacher spends 90% of his time on the sermon, 10% with the people. And I said, well, I hope I'm neither. I don't want either of those. But I think because there's less separation between life and ministry in a small place, because there's less disruption, it's easy to think that preaching is less important.

It can be tempting to neglect preparation to be at every bedside and every sideline. It's well-meaning, but there's an unintended consequence. We denigrate the word of God, the role of the church, the need for preaching.

We communicate that if you want a doctor, you should get a doctor who's an excellent doctor. If you want a welder, you should get an excellent welder. If you want a teacher, you should strive to get an excellent teacher.

But if you want a preacher, as long as you try hard, it's okay. As long as you're a good-hearted guy, it's okay. But we've denigrated the word of God. We've built our people into something other than what God has in mind for us.

[24 : 35] So preach exegetically, because your people need a preacher just as much as they need a pastor. I think one of the things we've seen since planting here is that in this place, people are longing for the word of God.

I think they're under-taught. I think it's a thin gospel at times in places like this. They've been taught just given fire insurance, so to speak.

Just proclaim the gospel, which is wonderfully and true, but they've not been fed well. They've been kept in elementary school and not been taught more about what the gospel implications are for life. And so it's so vital. Preach pastorally. After reminding them of how he preached sincerely, the third aspect of example of serving the Lord is his commitment to preach pastorally.

Because he's devoted to serving the Lord by preaching sincerely and exegetically, he gives himself to preaching pastorally. He does not swing in for a one-week revival.

[25 : 39] He moved in. This is so striking about Paul's ministry. It seems that he's always on the move, but if you're reading Acts, he's going very, very slow. He spends three years, among whom I've gone about day and night, or night and day for three years among you, teaching in public and in private and house to house.

He devoted himself to pastoring by preaching. For him, pastoring and preaching were not separate activities. To preach meant to pastor and to pastor meant to preach.

In transferring the ministry to the elders in Ephesus, he calls them to pastor, to shepherd. He says, pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Because of his example, they knew the integral and foundation of calling the shepherd was preaching. But it was preaching for the purpose of pastoring.

This verse is incredible. There are many important things to it. But foremost is this image of shepherding that undergirds this verse. Pay careful attention to all the flock to care.

[26 : 53] That's the shepherd word for the church of God, which he obtained with his blood. On the one hand, it accents the church is God's church. All the members of the Trinity are here.

The Holy Spirit has made you overseers. The church of God, which Christ obtains with his own blood. It's a privilege and responsibility.

It's God's church. And yet it wonderfully dignifies human ministry. He obtained it with his own blood. And yet the Holy Spirit made you overseers for certain people in certain churches and certain contexts for the ministry of the gospel.

Pay careful attention to the ones the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. So preach pastorally because your people need patient pastoring more than programs.

The pace of life in a small place is slow. It's fascinating that suburbs now have these communities. They plan and build these communities with grocery stores, drug stores, gyms, restaurants, and playgrounds.

[28 : 06] All you could ever want overnight. But in a small place, you're just dying for one new thing. Just one new restaurant. One new store.

The pace of life in a small place is slow. But so too is the pace of pastoring in the local church. Cheap or not. Fluffy, cuddly creatures we often imagine.

They're unintelligent, wayward, and obstinate. And often need to be rescued. They need shepherds who are patient and okay with a meandering, distracted, slow pace.

Pastoring must take precedence over programs. We can quickly boil down ministry to programs, projects, and initiatives. I think we can track the fruitfulness of ministry by these things.

They can become the metric. And yet we need programs to do the work of ministry. But we must remember programs are only acceptable if they help us in doing the work of pastor.

[29 : 07] Sometimes I think the program can be more about us and our personal feelings about this or that. More about what we want. The siren calls for pastors seem to never cease.

It may be life coaches saying you need to build your platform. Or social media encouraging us to comment on the latest thing. Or political pundits pressuring us to speak up on culture. And whether we believe it's okay to preach on these things, it's never okay to lose sight of our people. The people that are right before us. It's a tremendous gift for a church when a pastor silences the noise.

It kind of turns up the needs of the congregation. I love the way C.S. Lewis talks about this. Modeling something different in this information age. He's talking about a new cycle back 50, 60 years ago.

Even more than that. Imagine what he would say now. He writes, It is one of the evils of rapid diffusion of news that the sorrows of all the world come to us every morning.

[30 : 13] I think each village was meant to feel pity for its own sake and poor whom it can help. And I doubt that if it is a duty of any private person to fix his mind on ills which he cannot help.

This may even become an escape from the works of charity which we can, which we really can do to those we know. A great many people do now seem to think that the mere state of being worried is in itself meritorious.

I do not think it is. We must, if it so happens, give our lives for others. But even while we're doing it, I think we're meant to enjoy our Lord and in him our friends, our food, our sleep, your jokes, and the birds' songs in the frosty sunrise.

I love the way he captures that. We're meant to feel pity for our own sake. You know, we're so connected that we can begin to think it's more morally right to feel saddened by all these things going on beyond our area and miss the things going on right next to us.

You know, the neighbor who's walking through cancer or something like that because we're burdened with something we saw on social media. It's a tremendous gift when a pastor is focused on his people and modeling that type of care.

[31 : 43] Preaching pastorally and modeling that for his people. Preach pastorally because your people need persistent pastoring more than a good performance. Pastoring would be a good gig if it weren't for one thing.

Sin. Our people, along with ourselves, have an enemy within that often leaves our labors looking utterly pointless. Flavio said, It is not so much the expense of our labors as the loss of them that kills us.

It is not with us as with our laborers. They find their work as they leave it. So do not we. Sin and Satan unravel all we do.

The impressions we make on our people's souls in one sermon vanish before the next. We can feel that, right? We know that reality. Our people forget so quickly all that we proclaim.

They have an enemy within. In many ways, because of that, we have job security. They're going to need pastoring as long as they're in this life.

[32 : 53] They have an enemy without as well. So they need our persistent pastoring. They need us to stay at the post. You know, they need us to focus on what we're doing instead of our performance.

Instead of what impresses. You know, I think sometimes, you know, like you were talking about a minute ago, assessing the whole meeting based on what was going on on the platform.

That can become a dominating category for what we take away from a Sunday meeting. And it's this conformative aspect. And yet it's missing so many of what so much of what's going on on Sunday morning.

Lewis Allen in his little book, The Preacher's Catechism, says, none of us is called to unholy attention seeking. Are you a pulpit show off? Do you like leaving the whiff of your personality rather than the realm of Christ?

We choose something different intentionally because we want to lead people with the aroma of Christ. Love the example of J.C. Ryle who conformed his style to his people.

[33 : 57] The high church Anglican, and yet that's not the people he's called to pastor. And the singers that we know about in the bluntness of his writing came because of his context. And yet we love him.

Fourthly, preach pastorally. I mean, preach faithfully. After reminding them how he preached sincerely, the fourth aspect of his example of serving the Lord is his commitment to preach faithfully.

We're commanded to preach the gospel faithfully, to preach where he has placed us until he returns or until he moves us on. It's required of stewards to be faithful.

But in this speech, the apostle does not call us to faithfulness per se. It seems to be implied. He ends with his benediction, this fabulous. Look at verse 432.

He says, And now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. You know, he's been reminding them, you know how I lived among you.

[34 : 59] Now remember it. Now model it. Keep doing it. And then he gives them this benediction about God who can build them up. Only God can build them up.

Only God can cause growth. You see so many things coming together in the apostles teaching. Paul plans Apollo's waters, but God gives the growth. God serves the church, not by servants, but through servants.

Only God can strengthen. That's that word for construction that's used in the New Testament repeatedly for edification. It means to build up, strengthen, establish.

You're being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Speaking of truth and love, we're going to grow up in every way. Being built up into him who is the head, into Jesus Christ.

Christ, only God can build us up. And so he's calling them to see as he leaves them, he's calling them with this word. Only God can give you the inheritance. The inheritance is all that awaits us.

[35 : 58] All that God has secured for us through Jesus Christ. Being free from sin to live in the presence of God with the people of God. Experience the immeasurable riches of his grace towards us in Christ forever and ever and ever.

It includes the great reward of all that Christ has done for us on earth. The great inheritance. So he commends them to God and to all that God can do.

Yeah, I'm a 90s kid, so I grew up watching Michael Jordan dominate. That's why LeBron James and the argument never holds a candle because I had the eye text. And I watched it again and again every year.

In his final two seasons with the Bulls, Jordan dominated the Jazz and denied Hall of Fame forward Carl Malone a championship. The stats say Malone would be one of the ones we were talking about had Jordan not been alive then.

Or Malone had been born in a different decade. Malone, called the mailman, had to face Jordan and the Bulls twice and get taken down. One of my favorite stories from those years is in game one of the 1997 finals, Malone was at the free throw line with nine seconds left with a chance to seal the game.

[37 : 14] It was on a Sunday afternoon while he was standing at the line about to take his first shot. Nine seconds left. They were down. Or I mean, they were ahead.

It would have sealed the game. Pippen walks up to him and says, the mailman doesn't deliver on Sunday. Malone bricked both shots.

Bulls were down by one. Jordan gets the rebound. No surprise. He wasn't the inside guy, but he gets the rebound. Calls timeout, comes down, hits the game-winning shot at the buzzer.

And Byron Russell's face, which was kind of a thing. The mailman doesn't deliver on Sunday, but the Lord always delivers. I just think this is so provocative, what the Apostle is saying.

Maybe it's a good word to be with us. Having articulated pastoral ministry and serving the Lord, the Apostle lifts the gaze to the Lord alone, who supplies all that we need to serve Him.

[38 : 18] These words are Paul's farewell, but he doesn't leave them one last word from him. Not one last, I love you. Not one last, I hope to see you soon.

Those words are wonderful, but they're not enough. He leaves them a word from God. It's as if he said, I will soon be gone, but the Lord will never leave. I will likely never see you again, but the Lord will see you all the way through.

I have given you all I have from the first day, but he will give you everything you need until the final day. Remember what he said, it's more blessed to give than to receive.

All you give to him, all you give up for him, all you sacrifice for him, all you leave behind for him, all you throw away for him, all of it and more will come back to you. I am weak, he's saying, as it were, but he is not weak.

I am failing, I am frail, but he is not failing. I will soon be gone, but he will be with you forever. And he will give you the inheritance.

[39 : 24] So how do we preach a big God in a small place? We do so by preaching sincerely, exegetically, pastorally, and faithfully, depending on his strength.

We take up our calling as pastors to build people of God for the glory of God with the word of God until God returns or moves us along.

Let us pray. Father, we thank you for these few moments. Consider this topic, this call to preach.

Lord, we thank you that you have called us to preach, not to a nameless crowd, but you've called us to preach to specific people. You've tailored us in a fist.

The Holy Spirit has made us overseers of the flock that's under our charge. There's nothing random or haphazard about where we are, about who we serve, and what we're called to do.

[40 : 24] Yes, sir. Lord, thank you for the incredible honor of taking our place under the great shepherd and doing the work of ministry among our people.

Lord, help us to that end, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. Let's pray.