

Paul's Farewell Message to the Ephesian Elders : Alexander Strauch

Act 20:17-38

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. (18) 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 that I set foot in Asia, (19) serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; (20) how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, (21) testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. (22) And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, (23) except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. (24) But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (25) And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. (26) Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, (27) for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. (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. (29) I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; (30) and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. (31) Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. (32) 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. (33) I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. (34) You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. (35) 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 himself said, '**It is more blessed to give than to receive.**'" (36) And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. (37) And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, (38) 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.

<https://bible.org/series/paul-s-farewell-message-ephesian-elders-acts-2018-38>

http://www.thespurgeonfellowship.org/media_portland.htm

<https://biblicaleldership.com>

Overview

1. Farewell: Be Warned and Encouraged: 73 Minutes
2. Farewell: Protect God's Flock: 54 Minutes
3. Farewell: Be Alert, Wolves Are Coming: 73 Minutes
4. Farewell: Entrusting the Local Elders to God and His Word: 53 Minutes

1. Farewell: Be Warned and Encouraged

Paul Summons The Ephesian Elders To Remember His Example

Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders serves as a fitting conclusion to Acts 13-19, and the end of Paul's three missionary journeys. This speech is an example of the kind of thing he would say upon his departure from a church. It is a beautiful summary of his concept of missionary work and pastoral work.

Pastoral Manual

Paul's speech to the elders is a virtual pastoral manual. It is the only record of Paul speaking directly to elders.

It records his final words of exhortation, warning, and future predictions. It provides a dramatic description of who they are and what they are called by God to do.

In short, this sermon provides us with an excellent synopsis of the uniquely Pauline, Christianized teaching on church eldership.

For Every Church Elder to Know

Every elder, then, should master thoroughly the content of Paul's apostolic message to the Ephesian elders.

History amply demonstrates that the truth of Paul's message cannot be overstated or repeated too often. The appalling, centuries-long failure to stop false teachers from invading churches can be traced directly to disobedience to or ignorance of Paul's warning to the Ephesian elders.

Every new generation of elders must grasp afresh the prophetic message to the Ephesian elders: Guard the church--wolves are coming!

1. Paul Summons the Elders of The Church in Ephesus

As Paul concluded his third missionary journey and headed toward Jerusalem to arrive for the feast of Pentecost (May, AD 57), his ship docked for several days in the harbor of Miletus to unload and load its cargo.

Since Miletus is but thirty miles (48 k) south of the city of Ephesus, Paul seized the opportunity to summon the Ephesian elders to meet him in Miletus for a final farewell. This would take 2 to 4 days.

In Paul's day, a council of elders pastored the Ephesian church. This is clear from the way in which Luke records Paul's summon to the elders:

Now from Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called the elders [elders] of the church [singular] to come to him ([Acts 20:17](#)).

Many people try to discard this passage by saying there was a city church and there was house churches; in each house church there was one elder. But this is simply not true. Let me answer this theory:

1) When people say to me, "There was one elder per house church," I say, "No, there were two elders per house church, one deacon, and three widows." They may ask, "How do you know?" I say, "The same way you know there was one elder per house church."

2) The truth is this: the Bible says absolutely nothing about how a relationship works between a city church and the house churches. We are not given any information about this.

3) The texts of Scripture outright contradict this theory. According to [Acts 14:23](#), Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (plural) church by church. According to [James 5:14](#), we are to call the elders (plural) of the church (singular). According to our own [Acts 20:17](#) passage, it is elders in the church (singular), however that worked out.

4) Second-century writers, 60 years later speak only of the church in Ephesus, not the churches in Ephesus. And of one overseer, a body of elders, and a body of deacons.

5) Eldership as a form of government is plural. It is shared leadership. This is how the Scripture presents this, in both the Old and New Testament. So even if there was one elder per house church, he would have to govern with the other elders and not make his own decisions.

6) Such a theory cannot be applied today in any way.

2. Paul Presents His Life and Ministry as an Example for the Elders to Follow, Acts 20:18-21

Paul begins this section by calling the elders to remember his living example. Three times in this speech, Paul appeals to their remembrance of past experiences with him (v. 18, 31, 34).

From his letters we know that he expects his converts to follow his model example, just as he follows Christ, 1 Cor. 11:1.

God teaches us much through the lives of people ([Heb. 12:1](#) – The great cloud of witnesses.) For people who do not have literature or possibly cannot read, living examples is one of God’s ways of teaching great truths.

Truths and principles have to be fleshed out in real life. And they stick in the mind like glue. His example was a model for others to follow and to receive inspiration.

A. You Know My Manner of Life and Trials, v.19

The elders are to rehearse his life example. Notice that Paul emphasizes the whole time he was with them, even from the first day. He did not ride in on a white horse to lecture to them once a week. He lived with them day and night. His life was transparent to them.

What Paul wants to emphasize in this section is the **manner** of his ministry. He will deal with the **content** of his ministry later.

(1) Serving with All Humility

This is a key Pauline statement. Paul served as a slave serves his master, and he serves Christ and his body with humility. It is the heart of the true, Christian servant.

The great temptation of every servant of the Lord is *the* struggle with human pride, especially the dangers of religious pride. **Pride grows in the human heart like lard on a pig**, said Alexander Sol. Pride saturates our minds.

Paul was not like the Pharisees. They loved the chief seats in the synagogues. They loved the greetings in the marketplace. They loved titles. They loved money. They were very concerned about how people viewed them. They loved themselves. They used their religious position to exalt themselves and to gain advantage over other people. This is why they were such hypocrites ([Luke 20:46-47](#)).

[Matthew 7](#) is a brilliant analysis of religious pride and self-righteousness.

How many of the servants of the Lord have used their Christian position simply to inflate their egos and to gain for themselves recognition, privilege, and even money? Jesus is very clear about this – humility is the path of his followers.

Nothing is more contrary to the Gospel of the cross of Christ than pride, or what Dr. Grounds called BIG SHOT SYNDROME. This is why one of the qualifications for an elder is “not arrogant” ([Titus 1:7](#)).

John the Baptists said, “I am not even worthy to carry His sandals.” We are nothing – He is everything.

Let us all seek to be men who are humble, because the proud man is self-deceived and will never be exalted by Christ.

Let us be Phil.-2 leaders and have the attitude of Christ. Humility is reality. Humility draws people;

Pride repels people.

Like our Lord, let us be prepared to wash one another’s feet and follow the example of our great Lord ([John 13](#)).

It is so important that our lives and our work and our relationships are marked by humility, not pride or conceit.

(2) Serving with Tears

There are many tears in Christian ministry. There are many heartaches in this life. We face deaths of loved ones, sickness, cancers.

We face failure with people we have spent a lifetime working with, who turn on Christ.

Our life’s work can blow up in our face.

Some desert the faith

Some have their marriages ruined

Some fail sexually

Some face church discipline

Some split the church and families

The problems are endless.

The Corinthians caused Paul terrible heartache and anxiety.

The book of Galatians shows the heartache he faced with his converts.

[2 Timothy 1:15](#) speaks of the Asian defection from Paul.

If you have worked with people, you know there are many tears over so many sad situations. George Verwer calls missions work “messy-ology.”

(3) Serving while Persecuted

No one has faced the persecution that the Apostle Paul faced, especially from the Jews. Read of this in Acts where 40 influential men would not eat or drink till they killed him. He was constantly hounded by his opponents. He had many enemies. Death faced him regularly. Read [2 Corinthians 11](#).

B. You Know My In-depth Method of Teaching and Evangelism, vv.20-21

First, he had them remember his example. Now he has them remember his teaching ministry. He emphasizes the thoroughness of his teaching ministry.

Paul makes the very important claim that he held back nothing that was profitable doctrinally. This is a major point in this farewell message. He will leave them, but his teachings will remain. Twice he mentions this point of withholding no truth.

This emphasizes the comprehensive nature of Paul’s teaching ministry.

There is always the temptation of church leaders to avoid certain controversial subjects or to not tell the whole story, like hell and judgment.

Dave Peterson suggests, “*that some of the elders may have faced the temptation to water down the message. Paul’s refusal to dilute the truth is highlighted in several of his letters ([2 Cor. 2:17](#); [4:2-5](#); [Gal. 4:16](#)).*”

More about this in verse 27.

(1) Teaching

We know that the church in Ephesus was a well-established church. Paul spent three intensive years in Ephesus teaching the church and reaching out with the gospel (AD 53-56). We should not think that the original believers in Ephesus were biblically or historically illiterate. They were thoroughly taught by Christ's apostle and master teacher of the Gentile churches.

Paul, like his Master, was preeminently a teacher. When people described Jesus Christ, they said, **“Teacher.”**

In his great commission, teaching new converts to obey **all** that He taught them is part of the commission. But note carefully, it is **teaching them to obey** all his teaching, which is much more than cognitive-oriented teaching. This is obedience-oriented teaching.

So, Paul is a preeminently a teacher of the Gentiles.

Elders are teachers, or they are not elders. Please note [Titus 1:9](#). The reason eldership does not work in churches today is because they do not have biblical elders – they have board elders. All elders must know the Bible, Christian doctrine, and be able to protect the church from false teachers, or they are not elders.

Paul is so concerned about this issue that he says to the struggling church in Ephesus, **“give double honor to the elders who labor in preaching and teaching”** ([1 Tim. 5:17-18](#)).

Public Teaching

He taught them in public, which means this was not an esoteric religion that only the illuminati or a private, sectarian group can understand. He **rented the lecture hall of Tyrannus** ([Acts 19:8-9](#)) for 2 years to teach publicly for all to come and hear. He would also have used earlier the synagogue.

House to House ([Acts 18:7-8](#))

Some of the best teaching you will ever find for profit will be in home teaching. I had Bible studies for many years in my home, where we could go for hours and we could get very deep into the text. The home setting is informal, relaxed, more conversational, more interactive, and in many ways, impacting on the mind.

(Illustration, Jim Gilliland.)

(2) Testifying both to Jews and to Greeks

- Repentance towards God

What is repentance? D. A. Carson gives a good definition of repentance:

What is meant is not merely an intellectual change of mind or mere grief, still less doing penance, but a radical transformation of the entire person, a fundamental turnaround involving mind and action and including overtones of grief, which results in “fruit in keeping with repentance.” Of course, all this assumes that man’s actions are fundamentally off course and need radical change.

Through repentance, one will demonstrate:

- That he accepts Christ’s evaluation of its fallen condition,
- That he has judged himself according to Christ’s Word to be sinful and deserving of divine discipline,
- That he grieves over his loss of love and displeasure to Christ,
- That he is turning away from sin and returning to his past life of love,
- That he will, by God’s grace, take appropriate action.

Remember that Paul is talking to people who were once idolaters and believed in many gods. They must repent and completely turn away from polytheism, and turn to the only true living God.

And with Jews, we know that John the Baptist’s first words were “Repent.” The Old Testament covenant people of God needed, above all, repentance. They were not ready for their Messiah.

- Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ

Repentance emphasizes the negative aspect of the response to the Gospel, and faith, the positive side of salvation. These two qualities are two sides of the same coin.

Dave Peterson writes this, “**Genuine faith demands repentance, and sincere repentance will continue to flow from saving faith**” (p. 565).

I want to make a comment about this title – a short side bar. Too many people to day just say, “Jesus.” Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Now, there is nothing wrong with saying Jesus, but there is something wrong if we never call Him Lord or Christ or Christ Jesus. Here Paul gives Him His full title. He is not just Jesus – He is the Lord, He is the Christ. Let us be careful of this overuse of His earthly name.

I want you to notice that our belief is in a Person. [Romans 1](#) says, “**The Gospel of God... concerning His Son.**” ([Rom. 1:1, 3](#)) The Gospel is about the Son of God and His redemptive work.

We are not believing in some abstract, theological propositions or philosophical guess work or speculations. We are believing in a Person – the most wonderful Person who ever lived, who God said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” He is the reason for breathing. Actually, Christ is our life.

His life is recorded in four Gospels for all the read and study and evaluate.

3. Paul Declares His Total Dedication to the Gospel Mission, Acts 20:22-24 Going to Jerusalem

Paul shifts gears now, and turns to his up-and-coming travels. Paul is going to Jerusalem. He is at this time carrying the offering from the Gentile churches.

As he travels, the Holy Spirit through prophets warn him that imprisonment and afflictions await him. The Holy Spirit was not prophesying prosperity and health and success and long life. This is the perfect time to run and hid under one bed or get out of ministry. NO, he is faithful to his call and will fact death if he needs to. He is a man of courage and faithfulness. He is fearless.

It is in this context that Paul states his amazing dedication to the Gospel.

Outstanding Declaration

Here is one of the most inspiring statements in the New Testament.

Nothing matters to Paul more than the completion of his task of spreading the message of Christ crucified. Paul is willing to lose his life for the sake of the Gospel.

Paul duplicates his Master’s own determination to complete His mission as laid out by His Father. How many of us can say this? I find this very convicting.

First, he says, “I do not account my life of any value not as precious to myself.” Here is a man who is so dedicated to the Gospel, that his own future life, his own reputation, his own comfort, his own securities are of no account to him. On a scale, his own life is out weighted by his commission in the gospel.

You can feel his conviction! You can feel his energy, his unction.

Two Images

Paul uses two images.

(1) **One is to run the race and complete the course.** This is a marathon, a cross country race.

(2) The other is to accomplish the **commissioned ministry** he received from Christ. In this, he follows the Lord Jesus.

Message Received From God

Notice that the ministry is something he received from the Lord Jesus.

He did not sign up to be an apostle. Christ took the initiative and reached down and saved him.

The Gospel was revealed to him from heaven. It is a revelation. He is the messenger, the emissary. He did not make up this message. He is not a novel theologian, a clever rabbi.

I don't think anyone would ever think up the Gospel, or think up being "in Christ," or "adoption," or "the body of Christ made up of Jew and Gentile," "one new man, one new humanity." It must be by revelation. This is brought out in the book of Revelation.

Testifying to the Gospel of the Grace of God

His ministry is to testify to the good news of the grace of God.

In Acts, the word "Gospel" (*euangelion*) is used only here and in [Acts 15:7](#). The verb, however, "to evangelize" (*euangelizomiai*) is used often.

The grace of God is a major theme in Paul's letters. Paul's gospel is not the gospel of human merit or works or law-keeping. We are saved by Grace. Sinners before a holy God need grace.

Paul could never get over God's grace in giving his Son to undeserving sinners.

The older you get the more you will appreciate God's grace. This is why it is good news.

In [Acts 15:11](#), Peter also speaks of the Gospel as “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” that is for Jew and Gentile on the same basis Paul gives ([Acts 15:11](#)). There is an important point here. Paul and Peter preach the same Gospel of God’s grace.

Most often in Acts, the Gospel is called “the word,” although there are other, different phrases for it.

Paul was the most gospel centered man who ever lived. His ministry is gospel centered. He was not ashamed of the gospel.

Oh that we might love to preach the grace of God in the Gospel!

Acts: Luke reports that as a result of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” In addition, “the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” ([Acts 19:10-11](#), 20). Paul’s impact upon Ephesus was so influential that the message of the gospel threatened the city’s economic stability and religious worship, resulting in a city-wide riot and Paul’s eventual departure from Ephesus ([Acts 19:1-41](#)).

Paul is an example to follow. He is inspiring. He moves people. People without convictions or passion don’t influence people or move people.

2. Farewell: Protect God's Flock

Note: Outline numbering continued from Part 1

4. Paul Relinquishes His Responsibility as their Teacher and Leader, Acts 20:25-27

Now, Paul again uses, as in verse 22, similar language to move to his next thought, that this is his final meeting with his former colleagues (v. 25). Sadly, he must say,

“And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.”

Proclaiming the Kingdom, [Acts 20:25](#)

By “kingdom,” Paul means the overall plan of God. Some people think that the kingdom of God is the overall theme of the Bible. Certainly there is the universal kingdom of God, and there are phases of this, such as the mediatorial kingdom that pre-millennialists would believe in, or others, a spiritual kingdom presently in the church. Whatever your belief about the kingdom, it is certainly a major theme, and it will open and close the book of Acts. What I get from this is that Paul deals with the full plan of God from beginning to end. God works with a plan.

Watchmen, v. 26 ([Ezk. 33:4-5](#))

Paul begins v. 26 with an emphatic statement. He is dead serious. Paul uses the Old Testament watchmen terminology that he has guarded the city from invaders and enemies. Thus, if there is any problem of false teachers attacking the church, it did not happen on his watch. Thus he says he is innocent of the blood of all. Again, for the second time, he emphasizes that he did not shrink from teaching them the whole counsel of God.

Declaring to you the whole counsel of God, v. 27

We have here a deep insight into the thoroughness in which Paul trained the elders and the church. There are great lessons here for us if we will listen. This means the whole plan of God, the comprehensive will of God and redemptive plan. This is laid out in Romans and Ephesians beautifully. This is all tied to the preaching of the Gospel, Paul's primary message. The Gospel has many dimensions to it. We can never exhaust the plan of God in the Good News. Ephesians has been called the crown of Paulinism. It explains God's universal plan for the church. It is the big picture. There is a mighty lesson for us all here. Paul taught the whole counsel of God. This means the whole plan of God.

So, I want to ask you: are you teaching the whole counsel of God? Or do you just preach scattered sermons?

The fact is this: our people by in large have no conception of the development of the story of the Bible. They have no idea how the books of the Bible fit in the overall scheme, nor do they understand the development of the covenants, or that the Bible is a progressive revelation.

I have a real passion to help people see the whole biblical story and the great redemptive events of the Bible, the chief characters of the Bible, the covenants, the great themes of Scripture, the prophets, and the law.

We can say the same thing about the New Testament. In a study done at one of our top Christian colleges, students were asked to place in chronological order the names of the chief figures of the Scriptures. 80% of the students could not put these biblical figures in proper chronological order.

Paul's words here are a ringing challenge to us all. Every new believer needs to learn the full counsel of God. No wonder Paul can leave with confidence that he has done his job.

This is why it is important that we teach the church books like Romans, Galatians, 1 Corinthians.

(Give the illustration of the pastor from Long Island.)

5. Paul Charges the Ephesian Elders to Guard the Church from Wolves, Acts 20:28

Paul begins his main exhortation to the Ephesian elders with the warning

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock.”

He wants the elders to do their job effectively. In a sense, he is focusing them. When he is done, there should be no question as to what they are to do.

The verb rendered “**pay careful attention**” = (*prosecho*) “**to keep watch**” or “**pay strict attention**” or “**guard**.” This verb is often used in the context of false teaching ([Deut. 12:30](#); [Matt. 7:15](#); [16:6,12](#); [Luke 20:46](#)). It is an imperative verb, and the tense used here indicates continuous action. So Paul is saying, “**keep a constant watch over yourselves and all the flock.**” The opposite would be to neglect the flock, to be inattentive, or to be preoccupied with other matters so as to be unaware of the problems and dangers confronting the flock. In contrast, “**Unceasing vigilance is the essential requirement in shepherds.**”¹ The idea is watchfulness, alertness.

Soul Care

“Pay careful attention to yourselves.” In order to fulfill their task, the elders must first vigilantly protect their own spiritual condition. Spurgeon calls this matter “soul care.” An elder cannot guard the spiritual lives of others if he cannot guard his own soul. Matthew Henry: “Those are not likely to be skillful or faithful keepers of the vineyards of others who do not keep their own.”² So Paul wisely charges the elders to first keep watch over their own spiritual lives.

The well-known Puritan writer Richard Baxter (1615-1691), in his classic work *The Reformed Pastor*, sounds the alarm that Satan “has a special eye” for the guardians of the flock. Satan knows that if he can destroy the shepherds, he can swiftly invade and devour the flock:

Take heed to yourselves because the tempter will make his first and sharpest attack on you.... He knows what devastation he is likely to make among the rest if he can make the leaders fall before their eyes. He has long practiced fighting, neither against great nor small, comparatively, but against the shepherds--that he might scatter the flock.... Take heed, then, for the enemy has a special eye on you. You are sure to have his most subtle insinuations, incessant solicitations and violent assaults. Take heed to yourselves, lest he outwit you. The devil is a greater scholar than you are, and a more nimble disputant.... And whenever he prevails against you, he will make you the instrument of your own ruin.... Do not allow him to use you as the Philistines used Samson--first to deprive you of your strength, then put out your eyes, and finally to make you the subject of his triumph and derision.³ Elders, therefore, must take whatever action is necessary to guard their daily walk with God. Michael Green reminds us that,

“error has many attractive faces by which even the most experienced may be beguiled.”⁴

Elders must also guard themselves against being ensnared by the pleasures and cares of this world. They must guard against bitterness of heart, discouragement, spiritual laziness, and unbelief. They must keep their minds and hearts fixed firmly on Jesus Christ ([Heb. 12:1-3](#)).

I want to remind you all that as you get older, this may even be a greater temptation. John Owen writes: “Watch over your heart when you get older.” It is easy to become lazy at heart, indifferent, bitter, cynical, and very self-centered. Guard your soul.

We guard our souls by diligent prayer, by consistent and persistent Bible reading, by strong accountability with fellow Christians, by confessing sin regularly, by reading and keeping in touch with new trends, by going to good conferences, by protecting ourselves from life’s many distractions, by protecting our lives from hyper-busyness. It is the responsibility of each of us to guard our souls.

All the Flock

In addition to guarding themselves, elders must guard “*pay careful attention to all the flock*,” that is, the local Christian congregation.

To effectively communicate his exhortation, Paul employs the familiar, **Old Testament imagery of the flock-shepherd relationship**. He describes the local church as a flock of sheep that the elders are to shepherd and, especially, to protect from wolves.

The sheep-shepherd image beautifully illustrates the **church’s need for leadership and protection**. An essential part of this metaphor is the inseparable relationship between the sheep and the shepherd. The more you can learn about sheep and shepherds, the more it will help you in having a mental concept of what you are to do, and what the people are like. I highly recommend the books by Phillip Keller. They are very profitable.

Sheep

Because sheep are defenseless, an unguarded flock is in danger. So there must always be shepherds to keep watch over the flock. Throughout Scripture, a shepherdless flock is deplored and lamented ([Num. 27:17](#); [1 Kings 22:17](#); [Zech. 10:2](#); [Matt. 9:36](#)).

- The command to guard the flock means that the elders must keep their minds on the church.
- They must be watchful and observant.

- They must be attentive at all times to the spiritual well-being of the people. They must watch for people who have wandered off from the flock or for new believers who are struggling to survive.
 - They must constantly be alert to dangers both from outside the flock and from within.
 - They must know about new trends and doctrines that will influence the people. Great King Solomon gives the same counsel when he writes, “Know well the condition of your flock, And pay attention to your herds” ([Prov. 27:23](#)).
- Finally, we must not overlook Paul’s use of the significant, little word “all.” The elders are responsible to protect *all* the sheep--the whole flock, not just their favorite portion of the flock. None must be neglected, for all are precious.

The word *all* points out the difference between the elder’s role and the role of others who also faithfully minister in the local flock: the elder’s role entails the overall management of the entire flock, not just a part of it.

Like every other member of the congregation, an elder will have personal interest in and involvement with a specific ministry such as a small group Bible study, music, youth, Sunday School, counseling, missions, or evangelistic outreach. These ministries have a limited number of people and responsibilities to attend to, and one does not need to be an elder to do them. But the role of the church elder involves the individual and corporate responsibility to care for the whole flock with all its people, programs, and problems. So most elders carry a number of specific responsibilities, as well as the responsibility of the body of elders to assume the overall management of the entire flock. Not everyone qualifies for this responsibility ([1 Tim. 3:1-13](#)). It is a heavy load that few men care to accept.

The Elders’ Divine Placement by the Holy Spirit

Paul reminds the elders that they are divinely placed in the flock: “*All the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.*” Having stated his main charge to “pay careful attention,” Paul goes on to reinforce it in the rest of verse 28 and verses 29-31. In typical Pauline fashion, he explains the underlying doctrinal bases for his command to guard the flock:

- The Spirit’s sovereign will,
- The immense value of the Church, the Cross of Jesus Christ,
- The inevitable onslaught of false teachers

Paul reminds the elders that it was God, the Holy Spirit, who made them overseers for the express purpose of pastoring the flock. The verb “made” comes from the Greek word *tithemi*, which generally means “put” or “placed.” In this case the translation “placed” or “set” seems to fit the context best: the local flock they are to guard is the very one the Holy Spirit placed them in as overseers. The verb’s middle voice expresses the wonderful truth that the Holy Spirit did this for His own wise purposes.⁵ Moreover, the verb is used in the New Testament to indicate a special theological sense of divine appointment or placement ([Acts 13:47](#); [1 Tim. 1:12](#); [2 Tim. 1:7,11](#)).

This is clearly the intent in [1 Corinthians 12](#) where Paul writes, “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired” (12:18; cf. 12:28). Thus these men are overseers by divine placement, initiative, and design.

The Holy Spirit

Paul stresses the personality and will of God the Holy Spirit in determining who oversees the church of God. It was not the church nor the apostles that placed these men as overseers. It should be noted that Luke, although giving the history of the expansion of the Gospel, has much good, solid theology in his book. We should never be afraid to

glean theology out of Acts. We have to be careful, but it is full of Divine truth about the Holy Spirit, Christ, and the Gospel.

Although human means were not excluded from the process, the placement was ultimately made by a divine person, God the Holy Spirit. So as God's overseers, the elders must guard the church with their lives. To do anything less would be to disobey the One who ultimately appointed them.

Made You Overseers

Following the reference to "elders" in verse 17, we might expect to read that the Holy Spirit set these men as "elders" to shepherd the church of God (verse 28). Instead, verse 28 refers to the elders as "overseers." Paul has just exhorted the elders to keep watch over the flock, so it is appropriate for him to call them "overseers." The word indicates supervision, protection, management, guarding, and care of the flock of God. It stresses function and the word "elder" stresses position, status, honor. Elders' function is to oversee God's sheep.

To Shepherd the Church of God

The purpose for which the Holy Spirit placed the elders in the flock as overseers was "to shepherd the church of God." The ESV translates this Greek verb "to care for". This is not a good translation. It is not the Greek verb. This is the verb "to shepherd". The verb "shepherd" (*poimaino*) means "to tend as a shepherd," which encompasses the complete shepherding task of leading, folding, feeding, and guarding the sheep. This image of shepherding perfectly fits the Holy Spirit's purpose for the elders.

The shepherd imagery blends the ideas of authority and leadership with self-sacrifice, tenderness, wisdom, hard work, loving care, and constant watchfulness.

Shepherding requires long hours of work and complete attention--the shepherd must always be with the sheep.

It demands knowledge of the sheep, good management skills, and courage in the face of danger.

Most important, it demands love for the sheep. (Ill. John the shepherd in Spain)

Thus, **"to shepherd" means to govern the church of God, to provide leadership and guidance for the church, to teach and correct from God's Word, and to provide protection from all dangers that threaten the life of the church.**

We should note that in the New Testament the verb *shepherd* is used three times in the context of Christian leaders:

- (1) Jesus charged Peter to shepherd His sheep ([John 21:16](#));
- (2) Peter charged the Asian elders to shepherd the flock of God ([1 Peter 5:1a,2a](#)); and,
- (3) Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit placed them as overseers to shepherd the church ([Acts 20:28](#)). Twice, then, elders are given the mandate to shepherd, that is, to pastor, the local church.

The noun *shepherd*, however, is used only once to describe Christian leaders. In [Ephesians 4:11](#) Paul lists five spiritual gifts, and one is the gift of shepherding: “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors [shepherds] and teachers.”

So just as there are gifted evangelists and teachers, there are gifted shepherds. It is also noteworthy that in the New Testament, the term *shepherd* (pastor) is never used as a title for a church leader. Christ alone is given the title of shepherd.

The Church of God, which He Obtained with His Own Blood

He has already called the church “a flock.” Now he calls it “the assembly of God.”

The flock the elders pastor is a flock of unspeakable worth. It is special because it is “the church of God.” It is God’s congregation of people. It does not belong to the elders, the apostles, or any man. God called His flock into being and He is the One who cares for it, sustains it, and provides for it.

His Own Blood

Paul further expresses the magnitude of the worth of “the church of God” by the clause, “which He obtained with His own blood.” This is one of the great theological statements of the book.

Bible translators disagree over both the correct Greek text and the proper translation of this clause,⁶ but we must not permit these technical problems to detract from the statement’s intent and impact. Whatever the correct rendering may be, the point regarding the immeasurable worth of God’s church is still made.

“With this we touch the mainspring of all true defense and shepherding of the church: the cost at which God bought it.” (David Gooding)⁷

The price one is willing to pay for an object demonstrates its value. For the Church, God gave His only Son as a sin-bearing sacrifice. The Son bled and died for the Church. How could God have paid more for His Church? He has paid an incalculable price. How God must love the Church! How much it must mean to Him when His chosen elders earnestly care for His blood-bought children. Richard Baxter dramatically captures the passion of Paul’s persuasive reasoning when he states,

Can you not hear [Christ] saying, “Did I die for these people, and will you then refuse to look after them? Were they worth My blood, and are they not worth your labor? Did I come down from Heaven to seek and to save that which was lost, and will you refuse to go next door, or to the next street or village to seek them? How small is your labor or condescension compared to Mine! I debased Myself to do this, but it is your honor to be so employed. Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation, and will you refuse that little that lies upon your hands?”

Everytime we look out upon our congregations, let us believingly remember that they are purchased by Christ’s blood, and that therefore they should be highly regarded by us.⁸

What an immense honor it is to shepherd the church of God! It is a most serious matter when a pastor elder is inattentive to the needs of the church of God, yet this remains a common, worldwide problem.

I am convinced that one of the key reasons elders neglect the congregation and many men lack the desire to be elders is that they fail to comprehend the inestimable value of the church of God and fail to appreciate the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ ([2 Cor. 5:14,15](#)). When men grasp the eternal value of God's flock and the nearly unimaginable price paid for our salvation, they should be inspired to commit their lives wholeheartedly to caring for the church of God. As the great hymn writer Isaac Watts wrote: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." (Isaac Watts)²

¹Gooding, *True to the Faith: A Fresh Approach to the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 360.

²*The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 529.

³Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (repr. Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace, 1971), p. 7.

⁴Michael Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude*, Tyndale Bible Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 149.

⁵Commenting on the verb *tithemi* and its use in the middle voice, J.I. Packer writes: "In the middle voice (which insofar as it differs from the active accentuates the thought of action for the agent's own benefit).... The thought of God settling what shall be by sovereign decision runs through all these passages" (J.I. Packer, "*tithemi*," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1(1975): 477).

⁶The best rendering seems to be, "the church of God, which He obtained by means of the blood of His own One." For an alternate translation, *The Revised English Bible* reads, "the church of the Lord, which he won for himself by his own blood."

⁷Gooding, *True to the Faith: A Fresh Approach to the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 360.

⁸Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, p. 55.

⁹<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/w/h/e/whenisur.htm>

3. Farewell: Be Alert, Wolves Are Coming

Note: Outline numbering continued from Part 2

6. Paul Warns the Elders that Fierce Wolves Are Coming from Without and from Within, Acts 20:29-31

Following his plea for the elders to keep a vigilant watch over God's blood-bought flock, Paul fuels the fire of his exhortation. He explains the chief fear that motivates his concerns: ([Acts 20:29-31](#)).

Fierce Wolves Are Coming

"I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." (v. 29)

Paul knew the enemy so well that he could say, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." There was no question about it. It was going to happen. Since the local church is figuratively called a flock, it follows that its enemies are "wolves," the proverbial predators of sheep. The wolves Paul speaks about are false teachers who stalk the flock. They are called "fierce wolves,"

- A pack of large, fierce wolves who will not spare the flock from destruction.
- They are strong and cunning.
- They are persistent, and they come from every side.
- They are insatiable and merciless in their appetite for devouring Christians.
- Their presence can only bring death, confusion, and destruction. Paul says "they will not spare the flock." They do not care for God's flock, they care only for themselves and their perverse teaching. They are self-deceived teachers. They are self-appointed, not God-appointed. They are agents of Satan, not God. Both the Old and New Testament give us clear characteristics and identity markers of what these people are like. You can see this in the book of Jeremiah, Jude, 2 Peter, and the gospels. No one was more fierce on attacking these teachers than Jesus Christ.

Paul:

- Paul's presence was a powerful force against the "savage wolves" of false doctrine ([Acts 15:1](#)). He fought tirelessly against the infiltration of false teachers. His whole life was spent in defense of the gospel ([Phil. 1:7](#)).
- When it came to the truth of the gospel, Paul would not budge for anyone ([Gal. 2:5](#)).
- His most scathing anathema fell on those who attempted to add to Christ's gospel ([Gal. 1:7-9](#)).
- For three years, Paul had thoroughly proclaimed and defended the gospel in Ephesus, and his departure marked a crucial moment for the church in Ephesus. Now that he was gone, it was the Ephesian elders' duty to protect the flock of God.

Peter says the same things Paul says:

[2 Peter 2:1](#) – "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction."

False Teachers from within the Flock

[Acts 20:30](#) – "And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them."

Paul goes on to predict something even more subtle and frightening than wolves; he warns that false teachers will arise from within the congregation! Not only will wolves come in to destroy the flock, men from within God's flock--professing Christians--will emerge as false teachers.

Twisted Things

Such men expose themselves by teaching "twisted things." "Its result stands in contrast to something that is straight and true." (Dave Peterson) Paul means that they will teach perversions of God's holy truth--twisted, distorted, heretical doctrine. They will not out-and-out deny the truth of God's Word, for that would be too obvious and ineffective for Satan's purposes. Instead, they will pervert truth. As masters of subtlety and novelty, they will mix truth with error, reinterpret the truth, and change the meaning of words to give the illusion of truth.

To Draw in Disciples after Them

Such false teachers want followers, so they seek "to draw away the disciples after them." "The threat is of teaching that takes one off the straight path and draws disciples away from God's direction and leading. This verb means 'draw away from a place.' The image is of pulling someone in a direction that the person should not go or of leaving a former location." (Dave Peterson) They try to tear Christians away from the flock and its Spirit-placed overseers ([Gal. 4:17](#)). They care nothing for the church's unity or safety. They care only for themselves. How different they are from Christ's true servants who "preach...Christ Jesus as Lord" and consider themselves as the "bond-servants" of His people ([2 Cor. 4:5](#)).

Be Alert

Paul's solution to the ominous threat of false teachers is: "Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears." (v. 31) The word "alert" is from the Greek word *gregoreo*, which literally means "keep awake" or "not sleep" ([Matt. 26:38](#); [Luke 12:37](#)). It is most often used figuratively in the New Testament to mean "be watchful," "be vigilant," "stay awake and ready for action." In this instance it is a present tense, imperative verb of command that means, "keep on being alert and ready for action." It implies a conscientious effort, a mental and spiritual attitude of alertness.

The verb "alert" fits well the pastoral imagery of Paul's exhortation. A good shepherd is always alert to danger. He is not caught unaware. He is vigilant and ready to act in order to protect the sheep.

Paul's Personal Example of Vigilance

To strengthen and clarify his exhortation to be alert, Paul calls upon the elders to remember his example: "remembering that for three years I did not cease night and day to admonish everyone with tears." He is saying that his own life is a study of pastoral vigilance in action. In fact, the greater portion of Paul's speech to the elders is a rehearsal and defense of his personal example while in Ephesus. David Gooding comments: "Paul's address to the Ephesian elders is remarkable for this, that his exhortation to defend the church of God occupies scarcely more than four verses; but the model he offers of how the defense should be conducted occupies at least thirteen. The model he offers is of course himself and his behaviour towards the church during the years he was with them." (David Gooding)¹

ADMONISHED EVERYONE

Paul's vigilant protection of the flock entailed a ministry of admonition (*noutheteo*), which means "to warn," "advise," or "counsel." To admonish is to exert a corrective influence in a positive, caring way. According to Kittel's dictionary, "The basic idea is that of the well-meaning earnestness with which one seeks to influence the mind and disposition by appropriate instruction, exhortation, warning and correction."² In the present context, admonishing involves instructing believers about the persistent, dangerous attacks of false teachers and the human tendency to become inattentive to this danger.

Paul's admonitions started when he first arrived in Ephesus. He didn't wait until his departure to warn about the sure dangers of false teachers. He admonished them "night and day" for a period of three years.

TEARS

Paul used every contact with them--not just official occasions--for admonition. Furthermore, "tears" filled Paul's admonitions because the damage done by false teachers caused him much heartache: "*For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ*" ([Phil. 3:18](#)).

EACH ONE

Finally, Paul's admonition was inclusive. He never ceased "to admonish each one." His eye was on every single sheep. Oh, that elders today might warn and equip each saint with such thoroughness and devotion!

ALERTNESS, WATCHFULNESS

The reason for being alert is not just to be informed, but to act. Both imperative commands, "pay careful attention" (v. 28) and "be alert" (v. 32), imply action. A good shepherd is never passive. He knows the necessity for acting quickly and decisively in the face of danger. He knows when he must fight and when he must stand his ground. To be aware of danger and not to act is to be a lazy, cowardly shepherd who betrays the flock.

The Ephesian elders should at all cost stop these false teachers. They are in the words of David Peterson, "Guardians of the tradition of the apostles." They are to be faithful in guarding the gospel and guarding the community. They should be prepared to die for the truth, to sacrifice themselves.

This will mean lots of work. It will mean agonizing study, confronting of false doctrines. This is actually scary work. Two years ago, several of us elders confronted a false teacher who had stolen one of our sheep. I can assure you, it was not a pleasant confrontation. Like tough old weeds, they do not give up or come out easily. They will fight you. They will twist words and ideas so that by the time you are done, you are as confused as they are. Behind them is Satan and the "doctrine of demons" ([1 Tim. 4:1](#)). They are fighters. They are double talkers. Sometimes they have great personalities, and they are very intelligent, more intelligent than we are.

Because of this, many people will not stand up to false teachers. They'd rather ignore them, run from them, wish they weren't there. In our own city, in a large church, the pastor was teaching false doctrine. One of my friends confronted him repeatedly, but very few people would stand with him. Everyone was afraid. Finally, after years of being pounded with seriously defective doctrine, it was the exodus of many people that finally got the elders to act. So this is scary business. It is life and death issues.

Let us take Paul's example as a courageous warrior and shepherd who gave his life to fight for the sheep and to stand against wolves.

Failure on the Part of the First Century Elders

When we look at these Ephesian elders, we learn from the book of 1 Timothy that they failed to guard the church. It appears that wolves from within held them in a deathgrip.

The Galatian elders also failed. For them, it was wolves from without. The Judaizers invaded their churches and they failed to protect the church.

Two thousands years of church has shown repeated failure on the part of church shepherds to guard against wolves. What is the problem? What is it we have failed to do that this is such a repeated pattern? Well, Paul tells us right here, be alert! Guard the church. The great danger is that we think we're alert, but we are not alert. We are actually asleep. We are indifferent. We are too trusting.

(Illustration: I was brought up in the United Presbyterian church. The elders were asleep. They invited wolves into the church to speak from Princeton and Columbia.)

(Illustration: As a teenager at the table with a false teacher.)

How do we stay alert?

1. We must appoint as elders only biblically-qualified men. Men who know the scriptures. Note that one of the qualifications for the elders is [Titus 1:9](#),

- He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.
- So that he may be able
- To give instruction in sound doctrine
- And also to rebuke those who contradict it
- For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers, and deceivers." (v. 10)

The reason many elderships fail is that they appoint men who cannot do the job.

2. As elders, we must be consistently and persistently being sanctified by the Word of God. [John 17:17](#), "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." The Bible is the truth, and we must flood our mind with the truth so that we are hyper-sensitive to error. We can smell it, we are repulsed by it.

3. As elders, we must guard our reading material. If you are reading the wrong material, you will go in the wrong direction. I would say the same thing is true of seminaries. If you go to the wrong seminary, you might destroy your sensitivity to truth.

(Illustration: Dr. Bruce Waltke at Harvard. It took four years to untangle himself from much of the teaching.)

4. We need to be reading good material, like Martin Lloyd Jones and other great Biblical commentators.

5. Listen to great sermons on CDs. For example, you can get John MacArthur's material, Dr. Johnson's material, all free. Listen to the Word preached.
6. Go to good conferences. This is a great way to expose yourself to the wider church and get good teaching.
7. Read magazines like Christianity Today, Time Magazine, to keep your ear to the ground as to what new trends are being promoted. America is very trendy, and the trends come at us very quickly. We need to know these trends and to warn our church. (Illustration: "The Shack.")
8. Keep yourself accountable to other men so that if they see you wandering away from the truth, they can at least warn you. They may even have to rebuke you. Possibly even protect the congregation from you if you turn away from the truth.
9. Be aware of the natural human tendency to go to sleep and to be naïve and to lack courage in the face of false teaching. We have many example of boards and church elderships that allowed false teachers to run right over them and do nothing about it. In fact, the only thing they can do is yawn or get mad that someone tries to awaken them from their sleep to take action.

Elders must act because God has given them the authority to lead and protect the flock. They do not do this work on their own authority. Since the Holy Spirit placed the elders as overseers in the flock for the purpose of shepherding the church, they have the authority to act as shepherds and overseers. They are God's undershepherds who act in accordance with their God-given shepherding authority to protect the flock and to stop false teachers.

¹ Gooding, *True to the Faith: A Fresh Approach to the Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 356,357.

² J. Behm, "noutheteo," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4(1967): 1019.

4. Farewell: Entrusting the Local Elders to God and His Word

5. Note: Outline numbering continued from Part 3

6. 7. Paul Entrusts the Elders to God and His Word, Acts 20:32

7. Paul knew that the Ephesian elders would face many trials and fierce battles, so he concludes his message by entrusting them not to any earthly authority or human organization but to God and His life-sustaining Word:

8. “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” ([Acts 20:32](#)).

9. Paul had complete confidence in God and the Word to keep his beloved co-laborers safe.

10.A. Entrusted to God

11. “I commend you to God.”

12. He knew that the same God who had sustained two million Israelites for forty years in the barren wilderness of Sinai could sustain these elders in their shepherding ministry. The Old Testament Scriptures, which they all knew, were a powerful witness to the power of God to care for His people in the worst possible circumstances:

13. “He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end” ([Deut. 8:15,16](#)).

14. “For the Lord your God has blessed you...He has known your wanderings through this great wilderness. These years the Lord your God has been with you; you have not lacked a thing” ([Deut. 2:7](#)).

15. The fundamental principle that every child of God must learn and relearn many times throughout life is to depend on the God who is absolutely trustworthy. The Christian life is the life of faith--faith in an all-powerful and all-loving God who is the source of all life and grace. Yet, like Israel, there is nothing with which we struggle more than with self-sufficiency and unbelief ([Ps. 78:17-22](#)).

16. The troubles, failures, and problems that were to come were intended to drive these elders to greater trust in God, to a deeper and more intimate relationship with the living God.

17. Paul had experienced this trust in Ephesus: *“indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead”* ([2 Cor. 1:9](#)).

18. The elders would have to learn, as Paul did, *“that we are [not] adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God”* ([2 Cor. 3:5](#)).

19.B. Entrusted to the Word of His Grace

20. “I entrust you...to the Word of His grace.”

21. Paul entrusted the elders not only to God, but to “the word of His grace.” Remember, God is, through the Holy Spirit, active in the Word of His grace. “God and the Gospel cannot be divided, since He uses the Gospel to save those who believe” (Peterson). With Paul’s frightening predictions of wolves, false teachings, and divisions, the elders desperately needed “the word of His grace,” which is the full gospel story ([Acts 13:43; 14:3; 20:24](#)). The gospel is the story of the wonderful Lord Jesus Christ, His person and His work; it is the story of God’s love and grace to undeserving sinners; it is the message of forgiveness, the promise of the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. The elders must rest in this living, supernatural message and continue to learn of its infinite riches and depths.
22. The elders heard “the word of His grace” through Paul’s preaching. Elders today can read the same message as it is recorded in the New Testament. Paul was confident that God’s Word was perfectly sufficient to provide guidance, comfort, and strength for these hard-working shepherds. He knew, as Moses declared long ago to Israel, “*that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord*” ([Deut. 8:3b](#)). The absolute sufficiency of God’s precious Word to sustain His children through all the struggles of life is splendidly expressed by C. H. Mackintosh (1820-1896) in his classic devotional exposition on the Pentateuch:
23. Here [[Deut. 8](#)] we have the only true, the only safe, the only happy attitude for man, namely, hanging in earnest dependence upon “every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord....” We may well say there is nothing like it in all this world. It brings the soul into direct, living, personal contact with the Lord Himself.... It makes the Word so absolutely essential to us, in every thing; we cannot do without it.
24. There is not a single crisis occurring in the entire history of the Church of God, not a single difficulty in the entire path of any individual believer, from beginning to end, which has not been perfectly provided for in the Bible. We have all we want in that blessed volume, and hence we should be ever seeking to make ourselves more and more acquainted with what that volume contains, so as to be “thoroughly furnished” for whatever may arise, whether it be temptation of the devil, an allurements of the world, or a lust of the flesh; or, on the other hand, for equipment for that path of good works which God has afore prepared that we should walk in it.
25. And it never fails those who simply cleave to it and confide in it. We may trust Scripture without a single shade of misgiving. Go to it when we will, we shall always find what we want....A few sentences of holy Scripture will pour in a flood of divine light upon the heart and conscience, and set us at perfect rest, answering every question, solving every difficulty, removing every doubt, chasing away every cloud, giving us to know the mind of God, putting an end to conflicting opinions by the one divinely competent authority.
26. What a boon, therefore, is holy Scripture! What a precious treasure we possess in the Word of God! How we should bless His holy name for having given it to us! Yes? And bless Him, too, for everything that tends to make us more fully acquainted with the depth, fullness, and power of those words of our chapter, “Man shall not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.”¹
27. In order to effectively guard the flock from wolves, elders need to be strong and well skilled in the things of God.

28. Paul promises that the Word would build them up and make them strong. As a source of divine power, the Word is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” ([1 Tim. 3:16,17](#)). Elders need to be built up just as much as the people need to be built up, and the Word is that source. It equips us. It prepares us for our work. It is the best teacher.
29. (Illustration: A new convert only months old in the Lord, was told in the Denver Seminary library to spend the summer reading Karl Barth. I said, “Don’t read Karl Barth, read Jesus Christ and His apostles.”)
30. If elders, then, neglect to read, study, meditate on, and obey the Word, they will become weak and the flock will be in danger. Only strong overseers can withstand the pressure. Only the living power of the Word can give elders the strength needed to protect the flock from false teachers. What a marvelous blessing it is to have elders who are spiritually alert, strong in the Word, and rest fully upon God for all their decisions and activities.
31. Not only does the Word build us up, but the promises, the inheritance that is due all God’s people. This inheritance is eternal life, the kingdom of God, co-heirs with Christ. It is the result of the Word preached in the Gospel. ([Eph. 1:11,14,18](#))
- 32.8. Paul States His Example of Selflessness, Hard Work, and Compassion, Acts 20:33-35
33. Nothing is more apt to bring sinister charges against the Lord’s servants than money, so Paul’s farewell includes a disavowal of all greedy motives:
34. “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 Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ ” ([Acts 20:33-35](#)).
- 35.A. Not Covetous
36. “I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel.”
37. Few people can honestly make such a confident, open-hearted confession. Note that Paul did not say he took no one’s gold, because he did accept money from the saints. (The church in Philippi was especially faithful in sharing financially with Paul, as recorded in [Phil. 1:5; 4:15,16; 2 Cor. 11:8,19](#).)
38. Paul’s claim is even more profound. He is saying that greed has no control over him and that he has no inner, secret desire for material profit from his converts.
39. Anyone, even the greedy, can say, “I coveted no one’s silver.” Greedy people can be self-deceived.
40. Stealing church money is a huge worldwide problem. I have many missionary friends and in the parts of the world that they live, handing money over to the locals is a dangerous moment. One of our missionaries, his entire work was jeopardized when it was discovered that one of the leading local brothers had been

pilfering money. Just this past week, I had a three hour meeting with a missionary from Africa. The top African leader in their mission was caught stealing tens of thousands of dollars in medical supplies and Bibles that were to be given away free, yet he sold them for himself. That is why in the qualification for an elder, he cannot be a lover of money.

41. None of us here would steal money, but there are a thousand ways to misappropriate the Lord's people's money. There are many excellent excuses we can use. One pastor was using church money to play golf. His excuse was, "This is how I minister to people and do my work." In fact, we can steal and no one will ever find out, but God knows. Paul said, "I didn't covet even your gold."
42. (Illustration: Several weeks ago in Time magazine, an article appeared on generals and senior military officers abusing their privileges, taking many perks from the government. They had private cooks, drivers, using military aircraft, vehicles for their personal use. Their excuse was "We're not paid that much.")

43.B. Hard Work

44. "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me."
45. But Paul appeals to an unusual aspect of his work in verse 34: "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me." By this reminder, Paul reveals that his normal practice was to provide his own lodging, food, and necessities through his own manual labor ([1 Cor. 9:4-6](#); [2 Cor. 11:7](#); [1 Thess. 2:9](#); [2 Thess. 3:8-10](#)). Even more amazing, Paul also supported his co-workers in the gospel by working as a tentmaker ([Acts 18:3](#)). Thus, working with his "hands" was no token gesture on Paul's part. He labored both night and day ([1 Thess. 2:9](#); [2 Thess. 3:8](#)).
46. Like the life of his Lord ([Mark 3:20,21](#)), Paul's life was characterized by arduous, ceaseless labor. Paul labored at his trade and his preaching. The phenomenal results of his service in the gospel were the Spirit's doing, not the result of self-serving desires ([1 Cor. 3:5-9](#); [2 Cor. 4:7](#)). His life was proof enough that he had no desire for the wealth of others.
47. Notice Paul's emphasis on his example of hard work, "I have shown you that by working hard in this way." (v. 35) If you are a shepherd of people, you are going to work hard. Many of you will have regular jobs, you will have families to raise, and a church to care for. There is no place for spiritual laziness for the shepherd of God's people.

48.C. Help the Weak

49. "In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak."
50. Christians, especially Christian leaders, must display Christ's love by sharing their resources with the poor and needy. Paul presents to the elders his own selfless example of hard work, self-support, and sharing his resources: "In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak." I want you to notice that this is a moral obligation. Note the words "must"... "we must help." It is also a scriptural

obligation, required many times in the Old Testament. Part of shepherding people will be to care for those who cannot care for their own needs because of sickness, disability, age, or whatever reason. They will need our help because they are dependent upon the church.

51. He mentions the same idea of working in order to help the poor in [Ephesians 4:28](#): “Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.”

52.D. Generosity

53. “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

54. So Paul implores the elders to have a similar concern for the weak in body and in material necessity, always remembering “the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

55. The elders, then, like Paul, are to be characterized by hard work. They are to be employed in order to support financially their families and help the needy. They are to give considerable time to shepherding God’s church. By doing these things, they will be examples to the congregation of the type of life God intends for all His people.

56.9. Paul Bids the Elders Farewell

57. At the conclusion of Paul’s fervent exhortation, Luke records a touching farewell scene:

58. 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 mostly of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship ([Acts 20:36-38](#)).

59. Paul was not a church hireling; he was a true spiritual shepherd. These elders had worked intimately with Paul and been inspired by his amazing, single-minded devotion to Jesus Christ. Prayer, then, was the only fitting conclusion to their gathering.

60. As they “knelt down and prayed,” the elders looked to God alone for strength and guidance for the future. We can imagine that as a mighty man of prayer, Paul prayed for the spread of the gospel in Asia, for protection from false teachers, for the growth of the church, and for the Ephesian elders’ labors and trials. Although Paul didn’t command the Ephesian elders to pray, he could not have set a clearer example for them. It is God’s intention that those who guard His flock utilize, as Paul did, persistent prayer--the greatest means of spiritual protection ([Acts 6:4](#)).

61. Reward Day

62. Throughout this whole section, Paul underscores faithfulness to the Gospel. His whole life is a living example of how a pastor-elder should live. We have a big job that God has assigned to us, but may I

encourage you with Peter's word to the elders of Asia Minor, when he said, "*And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*" ([1 Peter 5:4](#))

63. _____

64. ¹ C. H. Mackintosh, *Genesis to Deuteronomy: Notes on the Pentateuch* (1881, repr., ed. Neptune: Loizeaux, 1972), pp. 760-762.