

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson Fifteen – Acts 20:1-21:17
Saying Goodbye

When Paul said goodbye to the leaders at Ephesus, it was the only address in Acts to a Christian audience. The leaders that are addressed are called “elders,” “pastors” and “overseers.” In our day when there is much confusion about the nature and purpose of the pastoral ministry, and much questioning about whether clergy are primarily social workers, psychotherapist, educators, facilitators or administrators, it is important to rehabilitate the noble word *pastors*. They are the shepherds of Christ’s sheep, called to tend, feed and protect.

Paul had taken his call as pastor seriously. He had poured his life into the Ephesians, lived well before them and was now leaving them, putting the care of the church in their hands.

OPEN

- Describe a time when you said a painful goodbye.

STUDY

1. *Read Acts 20:1-12.* In 20:1-5 what characteristics of Paul’s ministry do you see?

**Strengthening believers, recruiting others to serve with him in ministry,
extended times of teaching the Scripture.**

I imagine that Paul’s encouragement took the form of an exhortation similar to the one he would later give to their pastors in Miletus. It is noteworthy that Paul hardly ever traveled alone, and that when he was alone, he expressed his longing for human companionship. That he favored teamwork is especially clear during his missionary journeys. On this journey he was accompanied by men that represented each of the areas he had ministered to and would be visiting.

2. How do you think you would have been affected by the worship service at Troas (20:7-12)?

They probably would have been encouraged and amazed. They knew that God was a God of miracles because they had experienced salvation, but to see someone come back from the dead would have been especially incredible.

3. *Read Acts 20:13-38.* How would you describe the tone of this passage?

The tone is very melancholy. On the one hand is rejoicing in the work that God has done among the people. On the other hand he is lamenting the fact that he must leave them and go to Jerusalem.

4. How did Paul describe himself and his ministry among the Ephesians (20:18-35)?

He served with humility and strength. He preached the Scriptures to Jews and Greeks. He worked so that he would not burden anyone. He admonished people with tears.

5. How was Paul affected by the warnings of future suffering and death (20:22-24)?

He was not swayed from his course. He valued obedience to Christ more than his own life. He was not worried about the physical suffering that awaited him.

6. What does he instruct the Christian leaders to do (20:28-31)?

Pay attention to themselves and to the flock because people would rise up from among them to lead others astray through erroneous teaching. Wolves would come in, not sparing the flock. They were to be alert as a result of this warning.

7. What does Paul's instructions about the sheep he is leaving in their care communicate about their value (20:28)?

Their value is infinite, because they were bought with the blood of God's own Son.

8. Why was Paul not afraid to leave the leaders and the church in their care?

First, he trusted that God would protect His church. Second, he knew that elders were being left in place to protect the sheep and guard them from false teaching.

Summary: Each of the three persons of the Trinity has a share in overseeing the church. To begin with, the church is "God's church." Next, we read that he bought it with his own blood—the blood of Christ. And over this church the Holy Spirit appoints overseers. This splendid

Trinitarian affirmation should humble us to remember that the church is not ours, but God's. And it should inspire us to faithfulness. The people of the church are the flock of God the Father, purchased by the precious blood of God the Son, and supervised by overseers appointed by God the Holy Spirit. If the three persons of the Trinity are thus committed to the welfare of the people, should we not be also?

From Richard Baxter's great book *The Reformed Pastor*:

"Oh then, let us hear these arguments of Christ, wherever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless: "Did I die for them, and wilt not thou look after them? Were they worth my blood and are they not worth thy labor? Did I come down from heaven to earth, to seek and to save that which was lost; and wilt thou not go to the next door or street or village to seek them? How small is thy labor and condescension as to mine? I debased myself to this, but it is thy honor to be so employed. Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation; and was I willing to make thee a co-worker with me, and wilt thou refuse that little that lieth upon thy hands?"

9. *Read Acts 21:1-17.* What continued warnings did Paul receive about going to Jerusalem?

The disciples were telling him not to go to Jerusalem (v. 4). Agabus the prophet told Paul that he would be bound by the Jews (v. 11).

10. How did he respond to those warnings?

Paul said that he was prepared to be imprisoned and even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. He would not be persuaded.

11. How do you think those observing Paul were affected by his single-mindedness?

Certainly they would have been encouraged and strengthened by his devotion to Christ. Their faith would have been firmer after seeing Paul's strength.

Summary: What fortified Paul in his journey was the Christian fellowship which he and his travel companions experienced in every port. He was personally escorted from Caesarea by disciples to Jerusalem where he was received warmly. It would be an exaggeration to call this Paul's "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem. But at least his warm reception strengthened him to bear the crowd's shouts a few days later "Away with him!"

APPLY

- How do your priorities compare and contrast with those of Paul?

What would you like to be able to say about yourself and about your ministry at the end of your life?

What steps do you need to take now in order for that to happen?

PRAY

- Praise the Holy Spirit for his faithfulness in pointing us to Jesus. Ask him to stir your heart toward single-mindedness in obedience to Jesus and living a life whose total purpose is to bring glory to his name.

All material taken from:
John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.