

**18:24-21:16 - Paul's Third Missionary Journey (part 4)****Paul's Farewell Speech to the Ephesian Elders in Miletus – Acts 20:13-38**

***20:13 But we, going ahead to the ship, set sail for Assos, intending from there to take Paul on board; for so he had arranged it, intending himself to go by land.***

***20:14 And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene.***

***20:15 Sailing from there, we arrived the following day opposite Chios; and the next day we crossed over to Samos; and the day following we came to Miletus.***

***20:16 For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.***

Verse 17 and following is the only address to Christians in the Book of Acts. In 20:25 Paul tells them that it is the last time, this side of glory, that they will see him. Thus, it is his *farewell* address to the Ephesians.

***20:17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.***

***20:18a And when they had come to him, he said to them,***

Paul called the elders of the church to meet him in Miletus (20:17) in order to encourage them and impress upon them the greatness, the privilege, and the responsibility of the calling they had as undershepherds of Jesus Christ. Miletus was about 30 miles south of Ephesus as the crow flies, but by foot, the journey was much longer. It would have taken about three days for a messenger to go to Ephesus and then come back with the elders.

The term “elder” means overseer or bishop. An elder is a man to whom the Lord has committed the care, instruction, and the oversight of His church. The same individuals are called to pastor (shepherd); in Acts 20:28 Paul tells them “to shepherd the church of God”; that is, they were to care for, feed, protect, and watch over the church as a shepherd would the sheep. Peter, in 1 Peter 5:2, also says to the elders, “Shepherd the flock of God among you.”

Note three brief observations:

1) The church is not a democracy.

The church is not to be ruled by the will of the congregation, but is to be led by those whom God has chosen and set apart to be its overseers, leaders, and teachers.

Ephesians 4:11-13 says that Christ . . . “gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”

The church's life is never to be determined by the vote of the majority, but by the leadership of those whom He raises up. This is the way it has been from the OT times until now.

2) The church had multiple elders (20:17).

Although an individual can be referred to as an elder (1 Tim. 5:19; 1 Pet. 5:1), the word "elder" in reference to church leaders is never used in the singular (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17; Tit. 1:5; Ja. 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:1, 5). Elders in the NT are always spoken of as a plurality. When Paul established churches, he appointed elders (pl.) in every place (Acts 14:23). Titus was instructed to do the same (Tit. 1:5). Although the church in Ephesus met in numerous homes, the people were under the authority of the elders.

3) Sheep need shepherds.

God calls His people sheep for a reason. Sheep love to wander. Isaiah says, "All of us like sheep have gone astray each of us has turned to his own way" (Isa. 53:6). 1 Peter 2:25 says, "you were continually straying like sheep." God in His grace has given people to lead His flock as His undershepherds.

### **Paul's Past Ministry in Ephesus**

***20:18b "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time,***

***20:19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;***

***20:20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,***

***20:21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.***

Before Paul addresses the elders, he draws attention to his own ministry. He could simply be defending the integrity and character of his apostolic ministry (for he was constantly under attack) or, more likely, he is demonstrating that he knows the cost of serving Christ.

Paul's intent is to address the elders in Ephesus. His introduction shows that he knows of the difficulties, the trials, the costs, the sufferings, and even the deaths that will befall some as a result of being an elder. Paul knows that the charge that he is giving them is weighty, so he tells them to remember ("you know") his own ministry; he is not asking them to do anything that they have not seen him do in his own life.

Paul's consistency and integrity gave weight to his words that follow. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 2:17, "For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ." In other words, he is setting himself as a model of faithfulness.

Or, perhaps better, Paul is speaking as a man in whose life God is modeling for the church the marks of true pastoring.

In these verses there are four marks of genuine Christian ministry and Christian testimony in general:

1) The first mark is humility (20:19). It would have been easy for Paul to have an inflated sense of his own importance. He had been uniquely visited by the resurrected Lord and commissioned by Him personally. He had performed extraordinary signs and miracles. He had seen many come to Christ, leaders developed, and churches planted. Yet Paul served God with all humility.

Humility is a deep, all-consuming conviction that apart from Christ I am nothing and can do nothing. This attitude is reflected in 1 Corinthians 4:7 where Paul said, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"

2) A second mark of ministry is a heart of compassion. Paul served with tears. In Acts 20:31 he says, "for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears." Although Paul preached fearlessly, he did so with the knowledge that apart from Christ, people would spend an eternity apart from God.

3) A third characteristic of ministry is the certainty of trials. Paul was severely tested. Paul had experienced opposition wherever he went, yet in spite of it, he kept going on.

4) Lastly, genuine Christian ministry is characterized by the resolve to preach God's truth in all its fullness.

### **Paul's Future Sufferings**

**20:22 "And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,**

**20:23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.**

**20:24 "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.**

In verses 22-27 Paul further sets himself forward as an illustration and an example of what God is calling them to be as undershepherds of the flock of Jesus Christ.

Paul was undaunted in his resolve to go to Jerusalem (20:22), in spite of the fact that the Holy Spirit had made it known to Paul that he should expect affliction and imprisonment (bonds) (20:23). He was undaunted because he was bound in (or, constrained by) the Spirit (contra NAS; cf. ESV, NIV, Acts 21:4, 11). In other words, Paul's primary concern was not self-preservation; it was to accomplish the ministry that God had called him to (20:24). The revelation of future suffering was not given so that Paul could avoid it; rather, it was given so that Paul could be prepared to endure it.

It is also interesting to note that the word “bound” is a perfect participle in Greek. The perfect tense verb refers to an action that had occurred in the past with abiding, or continuing results. In other words, Paul’s constraint by the Spirit had been fixed for some time. In Colossians 1:24 Paul said, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.”

Furthermore, Paul said, “I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself.” The reason for this was because his primary desire was to finish his course and the ministry which he received from the Lord Jesus. Paul lived for Christ. He didn’t strive to maintain his own life; he strove to exalt the Lord Jesus by finishing the race given to him.

Toward the end of his life before he was executed by Rome, Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:6-8, “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

In speaking these things Paul is revealing to the elders in Ephesus and to us what God wants His servants to be as they serve Christ.

***20:25 "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face.***

***20:26 "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.***

***20:27 "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.***

The fact that he knew he would not see the Ephesians again prompted him to proclaim his innocence of everyone’s blood (cf. Acts 18:6).

“The language of guilt for causing a person's death is here applied to the spiritual responsibility of the pastor for the faithful presentation of the message that brings life. As the watchmen who warns people faithfully of the coming of an enemy is not guilty if they choose to ignore the warning, so it was with Paul as a preacher of the gospel. Paul's assurance was derived from his confidence that he had faithfully preached the gospel in every particular; he had dealt with the whole of God’s plan of salvation” (Marshall, 352). Or as F.F. Bruce explains, "He had lived in their city and gone in and out among them as a herald of the kingdom of God. . . Like the trustworthy watchmen in Ezekiel 33:1–6, he had sounded the trumpet aloud so that all the province of Asia had heard: if there were any who paid no heed, their blood would be upon their own heads; Paul was free of responsibility for their doom” (Bruce, 415).

This implies that Christians have a responsibility toward the unbelieving world. If someone was about to die physically and we had the power and opportunity to save them, but chose not to, we would be responsible in part for their death. This concept is carried over to our spiritual responsibility toward the unbeliever. If someone was about to be judged and we had the power and opportunity to save them

from condemnation, but chose not to, we would be responsible in part for their fate. If however, we warned them of the coming judgment and they ignored our warning, we fulfilled our responsibility and are free from guilt.

Paul knew that he had done all that he could to proclaim the full counsel of God to both Jews and Gentiles (20:21-22, 27); thus, if people faced judgment it was not because they had never heard the gospel; rather, it was because they had rejected the gospel that they had heard. Therefore, their fate is on their own heads and Paul is free from guilt. Grammatically, Paul is innocent of the blood of all men (20:26), since he did not shrink from declaring to them the whole purpose of God (20:27).

Are our consciences this clear? Can we declare our innocence in relation to the unbelieving around us? If they die and are judged can we say that their fate is on their heads since they rejected the warning that we had shared?

### **Paul's Exhortation to the Elders**

***20:28 "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."***

There are two key points:

#### 1) They are to keep watch over themselves.

The elder/pastor is to take constant appraisal of their own lives to make sure that they fulfill the duties of their position. In 1 Corinthians 9:26-27 Paul said, "Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified." He said to Timothy, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you" (1 Tim. 4:16).

#### 2) They are to keep watch over all the flock.

This responsibility to watch over one another is true of all Christians, but it is a particularly important function of the leadership.

The need of this exhortation reminds the elders that it is quite possible for the shepherds of God's flock to be negligent in their duty. It also reminds us of the OT passages where the leaders of Israel had failed abysmally in their calling to shepherd and care for God's people. In Jeremiah 50:6 God says, "My people have become lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray. They have made them turn aside on the mountains; they have gone along from mountain to hill and have forgotten their resting place."

In Ezekiel 34 God had said to the leaders of Israel,

2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?

...

4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals.

Later in the same passage God goes on and says,

12 I Myself will search for My sheep and look after them.

15 I Myself will tend My sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD.

Though the leaders of Israel had neglected the flock of God, God Himself came as the Great Shepherd of the sheep in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (Jn. 10:11). Jesus was not like the hireling that fled as soon as danger came. He keeps all that the Father has given Him.

Elders of God's church are to care for the flock because it is *God's concern* that the flock be cared for. He cared for His flock to the extent that He sent His Only Son for them. Elders are to be people who model their lives after the Great Shepherd of God's sheep. They are to display to the flock the care, kindness, and mercy of the Lord Jesus Himself.

Notice that the elders are set apart for their work by the Holy Spirit, not men. No wonder the author of Hebrews says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." (Heb. 13:17). Elders are accountable to God because God has appointed them to their position. And because their appointment is by God, those under their care are to obey them. They are to obey them because the elders will give an account of themselves to God for how they have kept watch over their souls. Rebellious sheep are not only a cause of grief to those shepherding them, their rebellion is unprofitable for them as well.

Verse 28 says that God purchased His church with His own blood.

This verse clearly shows that Christ is God. Also, isn't the Bible interesting in that it doesn't have problems in mixing the attributes of Christ's humanity with those of His deity? In other words, there are many cases where the attributes of human nature are ascribed to deity and the attributes of deity are ascribed to human nature. Acts 20:28 is an example of human attributes ascribed to God. God is Spirit. As such He has no blood. Blood is an attribute of humanity. Yet in Acts 20:28 the two thoughts are

mixed; God purchased the church with His own blood. Another example of this is in I Corinthians 2:8 where it says "The Lord of glory was crucified." An example of deity attributed to the human nature of Christ is in Romans 9:5 where Christ who is described as having come in the flesh (as a man) is declared to be God over all, and blessed forever.

The reason Paul is exhorting the elders to watch over the sheep is because God shed His blood for them. They are God's sheep purchased by God for Himself at an extreme cost – the very blood of God. The second reason to watch over the sheep is found in verses 29-31; namely, because there will be wolves who will prey on God's flock if they do not.

***20:29 "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;***

***20:30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.***

***20:31 "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.***

The danger to the flock arises from both outside and from within the church. Savage wolves "will come in" among you (20:29) and will arise "from among you." As wolves they will destroy the flock by speaking perverse things and drawing the disciples away after them.

1 John 2:18-19 says the same thing: "Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour. *They went out from us, but they were not really of us;* for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us."

There are antichrists in the church who arise from within the church but depart from it. John says had they truly been in the faith they would have never departed; their departure demonstrates that though they were only in the church externally, they were bankrupt spiritually.

Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God consisting of both wheat and tares that would exist together until the great separation at the end of the age (Matt. 13).

2 Peter 2:1 warns, "But false prophets also arose among the people, *just as there will also be false teachers among you,* who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them."

Because of this ever constant threat Paul says, "Be on the alert" (20:31). In spite of his warning we know from reading 1 and 2 Timothy and Revelation 2:1 ff. that what Paul predicted came to pass.

In 20:31 Paul once again offers himself up as an example of what he means. He was not unconcerned over the flock, but for three years did not cease to admonish them with tears.

***20:32 "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."***

Paul is conscious of the fact that all that he has told them to do is beyond their natural abilities. Thus, he commends the elders to God and to the word of God's grace. Paul's address to the elders applies to all who are in Christ. In Colossians 3:16 he says, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you." That is, they were not to be simply people who hear the word or speak it; they were to let the word of Christ inhabit them.

Paul also calls this word the word of grace. Grace is undeserved kindness toward judgment-deserving sinners. It is only by God's grace that the ability to serve as an elder can ever be achieved. Grace enables them to rise to their calling in Christ. It is grace which is able to build up and to give the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

***20:33 "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes."***

***20:34 "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me."***

***20:35 "In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"***

Paul mentions how he worked with his hands to exemplify that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Perhaps Paul is impressing upon these church leaders that it must clearly be seen that they are not self-regarding people.

These words that Jesus spoke are not recorded in Scripture, but most likely passed down through oral tradition.

### **Paul's Farewell**

***20:36 When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.***

***20:37 And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him,***

***20:38 grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.***

The emotional nature of the departure is recorded. The elders responded in tears, hugs, and kisses as they contemplated never seeing Paul again.