

Focusing on the Flock  
Series: Fully Devoted Followers  
Acts 20:17-38  
Sunday, October 17, 2021

It's hard to say goodbye to someone when you know there's a chance you'll never see them again. We have classmates we've not seen since graduation or childhood friends who are now only memories. There are former members of our churches that we've not seen in years. And I've met people in other countries that I won't see again this side of heaven. It can be hard to leave knowing you've said your last goodbye.

The book of Acts records a number of goodbyes as Paul left one city to continue on to another. Some of these were by choice, and others had to be made quickly so that Paul could avoid danger. But none of Paul's goodbyes are as emotional as the one in Acts 20. Paul believed this would be his final visit with friends from Ephesus. He didn't know what the future might hold, but Paul knew he needed to hand the baton off to these men. From then on, they would be responsible for shepherding their church.

Paul and his coworkers invested years in Ephesus, helping to plant the church, strengthen believers, and equip leaders. Imagine how difficult it was for Paul and his team to board their ship to Jerusalem, expecting they would never see those people again. Luke, who was with Paul, described the tearful farewell at the end of Acts 20.

“When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship” (Acts 20:36-38, NIV).

What would you have said to them before setting sail? How did Paul prepare them to function without him and to thrive in a culture that was hostile to the gospel?

Having already spent a week in the city Troas, Paul was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. To stay on schedule, Paul chose to not return to Ephesus but instead sailed on to a place called Miletus. We pick up the story in verse 17. Instead of revisiting the church in Ephesus, Paul invited their church elders to meet him in Miletus, some 30 miles away.

When they gathered together, Paul prepared them for his departure in two ways. First, Paul pointed these men back to his own faithful example while in Ephesus. He invited these elders to follow his Christ-like example as they would now shepherd their church. Second, Paul warned these church leaders about the danger to their flock that would arrive after he was gone. Paul knew how enemies of the gospel had infiltrated other churches that he and his team had planted.

As we seek to apply this text, I want us to see that this passage doesn't just speak to our own shepherd-leaders, to our pastors and elders. Paul's faithful example and his firm warning are things that all of us who belong to the flock need to hear.

When the elders arrived in Miletus, Paul gave them his final charge. His farewell speech began by looking to the past: **Paul pointed the Ephesian elders back to his own faithful example.** He reminded these men in verse 18 about how he conducted himself in their presence.

“When they arrived, [Paul] said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia” (v. 18).

Paul described his ministry in two ways. First, **Paul reminded them that he had remained faithful to his calling.** In verse 19, Paul reflected on his time with them,

“I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents” (v. 19).

Paul saw himself as a servant to the churches in which he ministered. But he also referred to himself as a servant of Christ. We see this in Paul's letters. For example,

“Paul, a **servant** of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1, NIV).

“Paul and Timothy, **servants** of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:1a, NIV).

“Paul, a **servant** of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness” (Titus 1:1, NIV).

Here in Acts 20, Paul emphasized his relationship with Jesus Christ as that of master and servant. Paul served the Lord,

“with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing” (v. 19).

We see this same commitment to Christ in verses 22-23 as Paul looked to the future.

“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me” (vv. 22-23).

As he considered his future, the only thing Paul knew for certain was that the Holy Spirit had warned him that imprisonment and hardship lay ahead. But he also knew that the Holy Spirit was compelling him to obey the Lord's call, even if that might mean facing danger.

Some might think that Paul was crazy to go on to Jerusalem knowing that he was promised persecution. In fact, we'll see in the coming chapters that Paul's friends urged him to reconsider. Was Paul crazy? Here's what he said about his mental state when writing to the Corinthians,

“If we are “out of our mind,” as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor. 5:13-15).

What drove Paul to obey Christ even if it meant tears and testing, prison and persecution? It wasn't the opportunity to gain status or financial reward. He made that clear in verses 33-35.

“I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (vv. 33-35).

Paul remained faithful to his calling because the reward of obedience to Christ was a better blessing than anything this world could give him or take from him.

While none of us will be called to be an apostle, and only some will be called to serve as an elder or pastor, *all* who are in Christ are called to faithful obedience to Jesus the Master. If faithfulness hinges on our circumstances, comfort, convenience, or anything other than our calling in Christ, we won't stand a chance when tears and testing come our way. Fortunately, our Master not only calls us to faithfulness, he also equips us for a life of obedience to him. Hear this promise from the Apostle Peter,

“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (2 Peter 1:3, NIV).

Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that he had remained faithful to his calling while he was with them. But, second, we also see that **Paul reminded them that he had remained faithful in his preaching.** Look at verses 20-21,

“You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (vv. 20-21).

In every situation, in every location, and with every audience Paul's message was the same. Paul didn't adjust his message if he thought that the gospel might offend. His preaching didn't change whether speaking in a public forum or ministering privately to believers. Whether he spoke to Jews who shared his affinity for God's law, or he was speaking to Greeks operating from a pagan worldview, Paul preached the same gospel.

Everyone who heard Paul preach heard the command "to turn to God in repentance and have faith in [the] Lord Jesus" (v. 21). God declared to the world that he had made a way of reconciliation through the saving death and glorious resurrection of his Son, Jesus—this promise of salvation is available to *all* who would repent and believe.

This week, I came across a helpful definition of the word *repentance*. *Repentance is a change of direction in how one relates to God.* This is true whether we're a Jew or Gentile, male or female, religious or irreligious. All of us have been alienated from God in our rebellion against him. We're all sinners, both by choice and by nature.

Some people embrace rebellion and want nothing to do with God. They find pleasure in living as the god of their own universe. Others don't consider the consequences of sin all that problematic. They presume that God knows that we're only human and nobody's perfect. Others will admit they've sinned but still misunderstand the solution. They try to gain God's favor to cover up the ways they've missed the mark.

But Paul preached a very different message. Repentance isn't a change of behavior. Repentance should *result* in a change of behavior. But if we believe that a shift from doing the wrong things to doing good things makes us right with God, we still think that we can save ourselves. That's not repentance. Repentance is a change of heart. It's agreeing with God that sin has permanently damaged the relationship and only God can restore it.

That's why Paul preached repentance *and* faith. Notice in verse 21 that faith is faith *in* the Lord Jesus. Faith isn't trusting in religion, it's not a pep-talk to do better or a pledge to try harder, and it's not a naive hope that things will all work out in the end. That's not how faith works. The faith Paul preached was an invitation to throw oneself onto the mercy of God and to rest in the grip of his grace.

This was the gospel that Paul gave his life to. Look in verse 24 at how Paul's preaching shaped his priorities.

"However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace" (v. 24).

Some of you listening today need to make a change of direction in how you relate to God. You need to repent. You need to turn away from rebellion, or indifference, or self-righteousness and call it as God sees it. You need to turn away from sin. But God's not asking you to clean up your mess before you come. He's inviting you to bring your mess to Jesus because only Jesus can clean up your mess. In fact, the message is even stronger than that. Paul said in verse 21 that when he preached the gospel,

He "declared to both Jews and Greeks that they *must* turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" (v. 21).

God *commands* all people to repent and to believe the gospel. But it's not just a message for first-timers. The gospel is for those who *will* believe, but it's also for those who *still* believe. God has an abundance of grace to give to those who come to Jesus with their messy marriages, their painful past, their gripping addictions, their broken relationships, and their destructive habits. This is the gospel that Paul faithfully preached.

Expecting that he might never see them again, Paul pointed the Ephesian elders back to his own example, that he had remained faithful to his calling and faithful in his preaching. But what would happen to their church once Paul wasn't around anymore?

At the heart of this passage, we see that **Paul warned the Ephesian elders of the coming danger to their flock**. Two weeks ago, Pastor Jerry reminded us that in the New Testament, the words *elder*, *pastor*, and *overseer* are used interchangeably to refer to those men whom God calls to shepherd the local church. The word *elder* appears in verse 17 where Luke established the context of Paul's speech. But the other two terms appear in Paul's warning in verse 28.

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (v. 28).

To warn these leaders about the coming danger, Paul first needed to remind them of their calling. These men had been given the task of oversight in their church. Perhaps, as we do, the members of their church appointed these men to the role of elder, recognizing in them God's calling and the necessary character qualifications to serve as an overseer. But just as the Holy Spirit had compelled Paul to take the gospel to Jerusalem, so too did the Holy Spirit appoint these men to the office of overseer.

The kind of oversight elders are entrusted with is nothing less than the care "of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (v. 28). Elders, whether in a full-time, paid capacity or in a volunteer role are given the responsibility by the Holy

Spirit to shepherd (or pastor) that which God has purchased with the precious blood of his Son, Jesus. These leaders were tasked with oversight over the church of God.

That's why Paul gathered them in the first place, not just to say goodbye, but to say, "Watch out! Be on guard! Keep an eye on the flock!" Notice also that these elders were to keep watch over themselves. Why? Look at verses 29-30,

"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (vv. 29-30).

You may not know this, but every week, we have men who serve on our Awareness Team. These folks keep a close watch on our church to help maintain our security and to assist in case of an emergency. If you see someone wearing an Awareness Team badge, thank them for keeping us safe. But imagine a scenario where on a Sunday morning someone comes into our sanctuary with the intent to do harm. If successful, the results could be tragic.

But Paul warned these elders of an even greater potential tragedy. He alerted them to the threat of distorted teaching. This threat was real, dangerous, and would come from all sides. Notice in verses 29-30 that the "savage wolves [would] come in among [them] and not spare the flock," and that "even from [their] own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them."

Folks, it's not just full-blown heresy that we should watch out for. That's pretty easy to spot. Distortions of the truth are more like counterfeit money. You may not recognize it until you go and try to spend it and realize that it's worthless.

When churches fight over things like political parties, pandemic procedures, and personal preferences, it shows that the flock is already under attack. Savage wolves have found ways to take the attention of the sheep off of the gospel and off of the Good Shepherd and draw their focus elsewhere so that they become vulnerable. That's why the Holy Spirit appoints elders and pastors, to help the flock fix their eyes on Jesus. And that's why we who are pastors and elders need to fix *our* eyes on Jesus our Chief Shepherd if we're going to stay on guard.

One way to put this oversight relationship into practice is by considering the importance of church membership. I'm not suggesting that our flock is limited to the names on our membership list. If you consider this to be your church home, regardless of your membership status, our desire is to care for you as part of our flock.

So what's the advantage of becoming a member? Anyone who has been through one of our membership classes recently could tell you that becoming a member isn't a registration drive to get more voters to the next congregational meeting.

One of the best explanations of church membership I've found comes from a book by Jonathan Leeman called *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*. His definition is so good, I've included it in the *Membership Handbook* we use in our classes.

“Church membership is a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.”

I wish I had time to unpack that definition, but for now, you'll either have to read the book or come to our next round of membership classes. In short, church membership helps, not only the shepherds but also the sheep, to know who truly belongs to God's flock, and how best to provide for and protect the sheep under its care.

Paul's charge to these overseers may sound like a tall order. With this level of responsibility, who would be foolish enough to agree to be an elder? Fortunately, while care for the church has been entrusted to her overseers, the responsibility for the survival of the flock rests in the Lord's hands. Jesus promised his followers,

“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:18b, NIV).

And so, along with his warning, Paul also committed his friends to the protection and provision of God. Look at verse 32.

“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (v. 32).

When it was time for Paul to board his ship, he and his friends wept together. They expected they would never see each other again. As painful as that goodbye was, Paul knew he was leaving the church in good hands. He trusted these men whom the Holy Spirit had made to be overseers. But Paul's ultimate confidence rested in Jesus, the one who said of himself,

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15, NIV).