

## I. Introduction

Good morning! In **Acts 20:17**, it says, **“From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.”** From our previous study, we know that Paul is nearing the end of his third missionary journey. He is hurrying because he wants to arrive in Jerusalem in time for the celebration of Pentecost. Now, instead of travelling to Ephesus to greet the church there, he asks the elders of the church of Ephesus to come to him. And, the elders willingly make the 25 mile journey to Miletus to see Paul and hear his message.



We have a summary of Paul’s message to the elders in today’s passage. This is a remarkable passage because it is the only place in Acts that records a message that Paul gave to a group of mature Christians. In Paul’s other messages in Acts, he is speaking for the purpose of evangelism. But here, Paul is speaking to strengthen the leadership of the church. Let’s read **Acts 17:18-38** and see what Paul said to the elders.

## II. Scripture Reading (Acts 20:18-38, NIV)

18 When they arrived, he 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. 19 I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. 20 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. 21 I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

22 "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. 23 I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. 24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. 25 "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. 26 Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

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. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. 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.

33 I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. 34 You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. 35 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." 36 When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. 37 They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. 38 What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

## III. Teaching

This message was given at Miletus, a city which had been an important port for over a thousand years before the time of Paul. We don’t know where in the city Paul gave this talk, but it might have been in the synagogue, since Paul usually visited the synagogue in every city that he went to.



This message is very personal. Paul emphasizes his own example of faithful service to Christ and urges the elders of Ephesus to remember his example and follow it. Three times Paul reminds them that they know his way of life and his message, because he was with them for three years.

Let's take a closer look at a few verses. In **Acts 20:19**, Paul declares, **"I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews."** Paul suffered persecution, but he didn't give up. Paul wept, but I think Paul wept for the people of Ephesus, not because of the hardships that he suffered. Paul was a man of education and status, but he came to the people of Ephesus as a servant.

Paul had the right to be supported by offerings, but in **Acts 20:33-35**, Paul emphasizes that at Ephesus he worked for his living, **"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.'"**

**"It is more blessed to give than to receive."** I am convinced that we can greatly increase our experience of joy in this life if we understand and apply this principle. There is some joy in receiving; but there is far more in giving. In context, we see that Paul is specifically urging the elders of the church at Ephesus to be generous in their giving. Paul urges the elders to be givers, not takers. No one should enter into ministry in order to receive, but rather we should all serve in such a way that we have more opportunities to give.

However, Paul's teaching here does not mean that he never accepted offerings to pay for his own expenses. In fact, in **2 Corinthians 11:8**, Paul writes to the church at Corinth and says, **"I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you."** Paul sometimes received support from established churches, but it appears that he declined offerings in cities where he was serving as an evangelist.

As a general rule, full-time workers in the church are supported by the church. Paul teaches this in **1 Corinthians 9:14:15a**, **"In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. But I have not used any of these rights."** Paul had the right to receive offerings from the congregations in Corinth and Ephesus, but he declined to use those rights. From this, we can conclude that Paul did not want anyone to think that he was trying to win people to faith in Jesus in order to increase his own income.

Paul makes several comments in Acts 20 about the gospel message that he preached. In Acts 20:20-21, he declares, **"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."** In public meetings and in private gatherings, Paul boldly preached to all the necessity of repentance and faith in Jesus. Paul did not hold anything back; Paul's gospel was given freely to all and he taught everything that would be useful or helpful to the people.

Many religions have secret teachings known only to a small inner circle, or revealed only to members who rise to leadership. But there were no secrets in Paul's gospel, and there are no secret teachings in true Christianity. People who study more, know more; that is the natural result of diligent scholarship. But all of the facts of the gospel message are freely available to all. The unbeliever, the new believer, and the mature Christian are free to study and learn the same things. The Bible is open to all and everyone is free to examine the gospel message and the evidence for the truth of the message. Before the Word of God, we all stand on equal ground.



Paul shared with the elders about how he was compelled by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem, even though the Spirit also warned that prison and hardships waited for him. Regardless of what trials might come, Paul was determined to finish the task God had given him. But because of the warnings from the Spirit, Paul knew he would not be coming back any time soon and he grieved the elders by saying so clearly.

In Acts 20:26-27, Paul went on to say, “Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.” Paul knew that he was responsible to give the people a complete message. But if Paul was innocent of the blood of others because he proclaimed the whole will of God, then what is the situation for a preacher who proclaims only a portion of God’s will? There is a severe warning here for all that preach and teach the Bible.

The Bible is a big book. It is no surprise that we all have some favorite verses and some parts that we don’t like. But we cannot take the parts of God’s message that we like and ignore the rest. Too many Christians, and sadly, too many preachers, treat the Bible like a scrap book that they can rearrange as they please, cutting some parts out and gluing new parts in where it is convenient. It is fine to have favorite verses, but we need to read and study the whole Bible to learn the whole will of God.



By the way, this is why I think it is best to teach through books of the Bible instead of relying on topical messages. Verse-by-verse teaching may seem slow, but it guarantees a healthy and balanced diet. As we go through the Bible page-by-page, the whole of God’s will is revealed and nothing is skipped.



On the other hand, choosing a new topic each week to teach on is like eating at the hotel buffet every day. All of the healthy foods are there, but it is very easy to eat too much of a few favorite foods and not enough of other things. I am sure there are pastors who use topical messages that are able to maintain a healthy balance through careful planning and self-discipline. But through the Bible teaching is much safer for the church and the pastor.



In Acts 20:30, Paul warned the elders of Ephesus, “**Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.**” Some of those who distort the truth are like savage wolves who are deliberately trying to devour the sheep. But others may be people who have simply gotten out of balance in their theology because of focusing too much on their favorite Bible passages and ignoring the ones they don’t like.

Whatever the case, Paul urges the elders in Acts 20:28, “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.” On the cross, Jesus bought us with His own blood; that is, Jesus gave His life as a ransom for ours, so that we might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. When we trust in Him and receive salvation, then we belong to Him and He places us under pastors and elders who serve as shepherds in the church.

On the cross, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But the risen Jesus is the Great Shepherd who watches over us all. We are all like sheep, in need of loving care and protection to keep us from straying and to keep us safe. As the Great Shepherd, Jesus watches us from heaven; He loves and cares for each and every one of His sheep. But Jesus also calls pastors and elders as under-shepherds to care for the church.



In 1 Peter 5:1-4, Peter writes about these things saying, “**To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.**”



The responsibilities of being a shepherd to the church are challenging, but there is also a reward for those who serve faithfully. Nonetheless, as I already mentioned, nobody should enter the ministry to receive anything, but rather to give. And in the giving we find the greater blessing.

Paul is nearing the end of his third missionary journey. He has served faithfully for many years and, by God's blessing, his ministry has been amazingly fruitful. But he is not finished yet, he is still running the good race of faith. In **Acts 20:24**, he says, **“However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.”** Paul's deep desire is to finish his task well. The Lord Jesus has given Paul the mission of testifying to the Good News of God's grace, and Paul wants to complete the task faithfully.

#### IV. Conclusion

How about us? We should ask ourselves, what task has the Lord set before us? God has called all of us to the race of faith and to some ministry to glorify His Name. Our roles in the church vary, but whether our ministry is small or large, we need to consider how we are running. Are we running well in the race God has called us to? Have we served faithfully in the role that God has given us? Or did we run well for a while and then grow weary and slow down or stop? If so, we had better get moving again!

Paul's example challenges us to make sure that we continue to be faithful in our run until we reach the finish line. I am sure that we all long to finish well. We want to hear our Lord Jesus welcome us home to heaven with joy. Keep running! Don't give up! And when the day comes and you cross the finish line and meet Jesus face to face, you will rejoice to hear Him say (**Matthew 25:21**), **“Well done good and faithful servant!”**

Let's pray!

#### V. Prayer

