



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 20:13-38

Acts

"Paul's Ministry"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our text is Acts chapter 20, verses 13 through 38, and I'm going to begin reading with verse 17. That's where the majority of our time will be spent. This is the end of Paul's third missionary journey. He is on his way back to Jerusalem. And we read in verse 17:

"From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them, 'You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, bound in the Spirit, – " and I take that as the Holy Spirit. The New American Standard Bible has a small "s," but the article is with it in the Greek text. So I take this as – "bound in the Holy Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish the course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that all of you, among

whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

Let me make a brief comment about that last statement. That is an unusual expression, God's own blood. God is a spirit. He doesn't have blood. It's obviously a reference to Jesus Christ.

And if we take this reading, then it would be a reference to Him in His deity. I think, though, the better reading is one that's found in the earlier manuscripts and that has the reading, "through the blood of His own One," which is a reference to Christ. It doesn't deny His deity, but that is probably the correct reading. Either way, it is about Jesus Christ.

Verse 29: "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 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. 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. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. 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.'"

And that last expression, "It is more blessed to give than receive," is what's called a logion. It's a scholarly term. It speaks of a word that our Lord spoke that is not found in the gospel. So if you go to the gospels, you won't find that statement in Mathew, Mark, Luke or John. Though the sentiment of what He said in those gospels

does find expression in that statement. But what this is is a statement that the Lord made, not recorded by the gospel writers, but one that he did make and was preserved in tradition and passed on by word of mouth, and Paul quotes it to us here.

Verse 36: "When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, 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."

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for the time we have together this morning, and we pray you bless it. We pray that you would build us up in the faith. This is why we meet. We meet to worship you, to sing praises to you and to be instructed in your Word that we might be prepared for every good work, and we might be able to go out from this place encouraged, strengthened and able to effective witnesses for you in the world. That is why you have put us in this world.

You've raised up your church to be a light in the midst of a dark and evil generation, and we pray that we would be that. So we look to you to bless us this morning, spiritually. Build us up in the faith. We pray for the material needs of this assembly as well. We know that there are people who are sick.

There are people who are going through various trials of life. The difficulties of life can weigh heavily upon us. We know that you're in control of all things though, and you can use even those, and do use the trials of life for our good, to draw us close to yourself, to build us up in the faith. And we pray that that would be the result. We pray that you would heal where healing is necessary if that be your will, but certainly, Lord, give encouragement.

We pray for our nation. We face days of important decisions. We face a time when we will vote for our government, and we pray that you would give us wisdom as we do that. Bless this land with

wise and moral leadership, Father. We look to you to do that because, ultimately, you're the one that establishes governments. You put them in place and you take them down.

And we know that you're in control and so we pray for your blessing, that it would be to our good, to our benefit. Bless us this evening, as we gather again together in this place to break the bread and take the wine and to remember our Lord and His death for us, and to be ministered to through the Word of God. We pray that it would be a time of great expectation. Bless us tonight; bless us now, as we sing our final hymn. Prepare our hearts to study together. And may it be a productive and beneficial time, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] It has been said that condition upon which God has given liberty to man is eternal vigilance. That was made as a political statement a long time ago, and history bears witness to it. When nations are not vigilant, when they grow soft and careless, they fall to their enemies. That is also true of the church. It exists, as it were, at the front on the battle lines and must be vigilant to guard against error, guard against the enemies that would undermine it, that would seek to destroy its life and its liberty.

We find that warning throughout the Bible. We find it in the Old Testament. The prophets warned and exhorted to be good watchmen. The apostles warn us to be alert. That is one of the main lessons of Paul's speech in Acts 20. Be vigilant. "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock," he said.

This is some of the last counsel Paul gave to the elders of the church at Ephesus. It is Paul's farewell address to them and has all of the poignancy, all the sadness of old friends saying goodbye for the last time. Paul had spent three years in Ephesus. He had ministered with these men; he had ministered to these men. They had grown very close.

This was the last time Paul would see them. And so he didn't waste his words. He told them what is essential for the ministry and did it by recalling his own ministry among them, then exhorting them

to follow his example. So in the first part of this chapter, of chapter 20, we are given a model of the church service with the meeting that took place at the church of Troas. And now, we're given a model of ministry from Paul's own life.

Luke gives a lot of attention to his speech which can be divided into three parts. It looks at the past; it looks at the future; it looks at the present. Paul first reviews his past among them. Then he tells them of his future and the danger he faced as he was traveling to Jerusalem. And then, thirdly, he instructs them on their present duties as shepherds of God's flock.

And I think out of this we can gain at least three central lessons. First of all, in the church the minister of the church should be preaching the Word. That's what Paul did. So the first lesson for the church and for ministry in the church is to preach the Word. Now we saw that last week, as we considered the ministry of a church as it took place in Troas.

They broke bread. They gathered every Sunday, the first day of the week to do that, to break bread, to take the Lord's Supper. And Paul was speaking to them, and he spoke until midnight and, really, beyond, until daybreak. So there was a lot of teaching and there was the Lord's Supper. But first of all, we see from Paul's ministry that the minister is to preach the Word, preach God's Word.

Secondly, guard God's people. And then, thirdly, do so selflessly, serve selflessly. Paul had been a trustworthy watchman over the church and over the souls of the saints. Now these elders were to be the same. They were to be faithful watchmen. They were to be vigilant in all their duties.

The speech was given in the town of Miletus, which is about 30 miles south of Ephesus. Paul and his companions had traveled from Troas which is on the northwestern coast of Asia Minor. They had traveled south along the coast of Asia Minor. They had passed the city of Ephesus. Paul decided not to stop there.

He was in a hurry to get on to Jerusalem. And to stop at Ephesus would have delayed his trip, and he wanted to get there in time to celebrate Pentecost. But the ship had a layover in Miletus. And so he took the opportunity to send for the elders of Ephesus, men he cared for deeply and to whom he spoke with a sense of urgency. When they arrived he began his speech by reviewing his ministry with them. How, from the first day he had set foot in Asia, he "served the Lord with all humility and with tears."

He preached the gospel. Multitudes repented of paganism; they turned from the practice of magic and trusted in Christ. It was a great revival that occurred in the city of Ephesus, and from that city it spread all through the province of Asia. Luke devoted chapter 19 to that great ministry that Paul had there. Paul served as an evangelist. And then he served as a teacher, building up these young believers in the faith.

He reminds the elders of that, and how he didn't "shrink," he said, from telling them "anything that was profitable," verse 20. In verse 27 he adds, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God," or "all the counsel of God," as the King James Version has it. So what Paul considered profitable was everything in the Bible. It was all the doctrines of God and he taught it all. Now, he didn't teach every book in the Bible.

At this time not every book had been written. And that which had been written, he did not have time to teach every book, every verse of every book. Three years is not enough time for that. But he did teach the full range of Bible doctrine. And he states that as the standard of his ministry.

That's what the apostles did. It is what we are to do. This is what is to happen in a church. The whole purpose of God is to be taught sin and salvation, the attributes of God, the deity and the humanity of Christ, the Person and the work of the Holy Spirit, the principles of the local church, the doctrines of predestination and the

perseverance of the saints, the doctrine of heaven, the doctrine of hell. The list goes on, the whole purpose of God.

Now how consistently that is done in churches today I can't say because I'm not in all the churches. But I can say this. The things that I have read, books and material over the past 20 or so years, is not terrible encouraging. A number of years ago, I'd say over 20 years ago now, a professor of pastoral theology at a major seminary on the West Coast wrote a book. And in the book, he made this statement, really, at the outset of the book. He wrote "Sermons on election are so rare that even a regular churchgoer may never hear one. No other doctrine has been so decisive in theology and so ignored in the pulpit."

Paul didn't ignore it. Read the book of Ephesians and you get a sense of what he taught. Read the first two chapters of that book and you see the subject of election and predestination covered, the doctrine of the Trinity and original sin and regeneration. Now, he didn't say that these doctrines were easy to understand. He didn't say that they don't require thinking on our part.

He didn't say that they didn't upset people. They do upset people. People walk out of sermons on the sovereignty of God and predestination and election, and they often scratch their heads over explanations of the Trinity. The Bible is a weighty book that deals with the profoundest of all truth, the Person and nature of God, who He is, what He has done, what He will do. It deals with the profoundest issues of life, what is required of us as God's creatures.

These things are not easy to understand. Learning is not easy. Learning is difficult. It takes time; it takes energy. It takes the greatest of energy to be a diligent student and understand things. And the more profound the issue, the more difficult the issue, the more energy it takes.

And when things are understood – and I might say this by way of parenthesis. Not everything in the Bible is hard to understand. Much of it, much of it is very clear. A first reading, one can

understand what's being said. Jesus Christ is being declared the Son of God. God is absolutely sovereign.

Those things, in my opinion at least, it's quite clear, quite straightforward. But when they are grasped and when one understands what's being said, those doctrines are not always easily accepted. Paul didn't say that they were. Paul didn't say that they were easy to understand, didn't say they were easily accepted. What he says is they are "profitable."

And there is nothing more profitable for us to do than to get the knowledge of God. It is true, and it changes lives when it is believed. So we're often faced with this situation. We have certain understandings of things in our own mind. We have certain prejudices, we have certain ideas that are naturally there, and they don't jive with the Word of God very often.

And so we read what the Bible says. It contradicts what we naturally believe. And we have a choice. Are we going to believe what we want to believe or are we going to believe what the Word of God says? Are we going to cast aside our presuppositions about the nature of man and the nature of God and salvation or are we going to cast aside the Word of God?

That's the choice that we face. The only real choice is very obvious. We must submit to what God's Word says and is true, and as I say, it changes lives. Now, that's what Paul did. He taught the Word of God. He was diligent in it. He was a faithful servant.

He didn't "shrink," he says, from telling them what they needed to hear, even if it was hard or controversial. He taught them the Word of God. But it's important to remember how he did that, how he taught them. In verse 19, he said that he'd served Christ "with all humility and tears." He was not an arrogant man. He was not abrasive in his instruction.

He knew a great deal. He didn't beat people over their heads with it. He didn't get angry with people for not accepting his

teaching. He taught with humility. He taught with patience. He knew that whatever he knew, he knew it by the grace of God.

Every ability, every bit of knowledge one has is a gift from God. Paul raises this question with the Corinthians, you'll remember in 1 Corinthians 4:7. They were an arrogant people. They had some knowledge. They were living lives that were at least better than what they'd lived before, at least in some cases, and so they became rather arrogant about who they were and what they knew.

And so he asked them, "What do you have that you have not received? And if you've received it, why do you boast as though you have not received it?" And so as they went down a list of things, they thought, "Well, which do I have that I have not received?" And I'm sure if Paul had seen them going down a list, he'd say, "Now stop that. My point is you don't have a thing that you did not receive. Everything you have is a gift."

Everything we have, our ability, our possessions, they are all a gift of God. And when one understands that, when we know that what we have is a gift of God, then it should give us a kind and patient approach to people. The only thing that distinguishes us from them is the grace of God. Paul knew that. Paul was a humble man. He taught with humility, and he said he taught with a lot of tears.

Now, I don't think he meant by that that he stood up before people in the synagogue or in the church or wherever he would have taught and wept profusely before them. He wasn't an emotive kind of person. But he did shed tears in private as he prayed over them. And as he will tell them again, the Ephesian elders, he admonished them night and day with tears. He is concerned about their souls.

He was a man who cared deeply for them. He was selfless in his ministry. That's why he taught what he taught. He knew they needed the whole counsel of God, and he spent so much time instructing them in it. Verse 20 states that he taught them "publicly from house to house."

He taught in church services; he taught in the synagogue; he taught in the marketplace. He taught wherever he could find a public forum to as many people as he could teach, and he declared the truth of God. He declared repentance toward God, a faith in Jesus Christ and other things as well. And when he wasn't teaching publicly, he was teaching privately. He was going into their homes. He was giving personal instruction.

Paul was keenly interested in their growth in the faith. And he knew that they only grow in the faith as they understood the faith, as they knew the faith, as they knew who God is, the Triune God, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. And so he sought to thoroughly ground them in God's truth, and taught them. And he said he did not "shrink" from it. Twice, he says that.

Why would he say, "I did not shrink" from teaching these things. I suppose because Paul knew that these things are not easily accepted, that the doctrines of the sovereignty of God, whatever, the Trinity. These are things that can upset people and they become disaffected from the things of God. They walk out; they leave, and so very often people will be a bit reticent on these subjects. They won't speak about them.

Paul said, "No, I'm going to speak on everything." He was courageous in his presentation of the truth and his preaching of it. He was a courageous man. That's obvious not only from what he taught but from what he did. It's clear from the next verses, verses 22 through 24, where he told the elders of his present plans to go to Jerusalem.

It was a dangerous journey. He knew that. He didn't know exactly what lay ahead, but in every city that he passed through, he was told that "bonds and afflictions" awaited him. And nevertheless, he went forward because he knew it was God's will. He was "bound in Spirit" or "bound in the Spirit, the Holy Spirit," he said, and later adds "I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course."

Self-preservation was not Paul's motive in the ministry. His ambition was doing God's will, whether it was teaching the Word of God without compromise or going into dangerous places. Paul then concludes the review of his ministry in Ephesus, in verses 25 through 27, by assuring them that he had no regrets. He could look back on his ministry there of three years and know that he'd done a good job. He was well satisfied.

He said, "I know that all of you ... will no longer see my face." But he adds, "I am innocent of the blood of all men." He means all the men who heard him teach, all the men who came within the circumference of his ministry, Jews and gentiles alike. He told them the truth. He told them what they needed to hear, not what they wanted to hear. He tickled no one's ears; he was very straightforward, very clear in his presentation of the truth.

And so he could look back on his ministry with a clear conscience and complete satisfaction. He was like the trustworthy watchman that Ezekiel writes about. He writes about that in Ezekiel chapter 3 and Ezekiel chapter 33 of the watchman. And the watchman was to tell the city of the dangers that were approaching. If the watchman did not tell the city of the danger that approached and the people of the city were put to the sword, then, Ezekiel says, "the blood of those people will be on your head."

But if the watchman tells them of the danger that's coming and they don't respond and they are slain by the sword, the watchman is innocent of their blood. And Paul is saying he had done that. All Asia had heard the truth. He had given them the warnings; he had given them the exhortations; he'd given them the truth of the gospel. Not all had believed. Many had in the great revivals in that part of the world.

But many had not believed. Many had rebelled against it, both Jew and gentile alike. Paul could say he was innocent. He was a trustworthy watchman. He'd spoken the truth. And now, he exhorts the elders to be the same.

Beginning in verse 28, he tells them to be vigilant, to keep watch. "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." Now, that is a clear verse on the nature and extent of the atonement. Christ died for the church; He died for His elect. God bought the church at the infinite cost of His own blood.

Or better, as the early manuscripts have it, the blood of His own One, meaning His Son. God paid a high price for the church. Paul doesn't say that He made salvation a possibility. He said "He purchased" the church. There's nothing hypothetical about the atonement, about the salvation that Christ accomplished, nothing merely possible about it. God did it.

There is power in the blood of Christ. He accomplished salvation at the cross. That is where the payment for sin was made, and that is where the payment of sin was accomplished and accepted. When Jesus Christ hung upon the cross, He said, "It is finished." Redemption has been accomplished.

That is where the words of the angel to Joseph, in Matthew 1:21, were fulfilled when he said, "You'll name Him Jesus" which means the Lord saves. "For He will save His people from their sins." Christ accomplished that on the cross, and now, by the work of the Holy Spirit and the through the preaching of the gospel, that salvation is applied to God's elect in every generation. They are brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through the preaching of the gospel.

Don't be surprised if God didn't choose everyone in the world and that Christ didn't die for all without exception. Be amazed that He chose and purchased some at all. And be amazed at the fact that the some that He chose and those that He purchased are a large number, an innumerable multitude like "the stars in the heavens, the sand in the seashore, the dust of the earth." No man can number that. Heaven will be filled with redeemed sinners made saints by the grace of God.

We're all deserving of wrath. That we receive any grace at all is what is amazing. God saved us – His work. And whenever sinners believe, they are saved, saved by God's grace. Now, the fact that accomplished such a great work at such an infinite price and sacrifice, makes the elders responsibility more serious. And that's Paul's point.

God has entrusted them with His prized possession, what His Son died for, and they are to protect it. That's his charge to them. "Be on Guard." Verse 31 he says, "Be on the alert." Paul knew that the opposition he had experienced in Ephesus – and you remember he left because the gentiles ignited a great riot against him and his ministry.

Well, he knew that that opposition would only increase in the future. And so, as leaders, they needed to be ready. They needed to be on guard. But notice first of all, "Be on guard for yourselves." That's where an elder's ministry begins, with self.

Not a selfish ministry, but it is concerned with self. Because if he's not guarding his own soul, he's not strong himself, he can't protect others. But that's true of every Christian. This is direct specifically to the elders. But it applies, in principle, to every one of us, every believer in Jesus Christ.

We are to attend first of all to our own spiritual condition, our own spiritual needs if we are to stand ourselves and be a benefit to others. But elders have a special obligation to do that. They have been entrusted with God's flock. That's what Paul says. They are to shepherd the church of God.

It is His flock. It is not their flock. It is a flock that he purchased at a great price. As Jesus said, He's "the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep." And He purchased those sheep, and now they have been put in the care of the elders.

And notice it's a plurality of elders. "The Holy Spirit has made you overseers," plural. The Lord has never intended for one man to lead a church as the pastor of the church. In fact, you won't find that

office anywhere in the New Testament. There is no one man who is the pastor.

The pastor of the church is the Lord Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews calls Him that. He calls Him the "great Shepherd of the sheep." And He has appointed under-shepherds. He has appointed elders, plural. This follows the principle that we find throughout the Bible.

In Proverbs 11:14, Solomon wrote, "in abundance of counselors there is victory." And so God has instituted the leadership of the church to be that of a plurality of leaders, a plurality of elders. Here, Paul calls them "overseers." They are watchmen. They look over the church like a shepherd watches over and cares for his flock.

The reason it is so urgent that they do that, that they look over the flock, that they watch over it like a shepherd and be on guard, that they be vigilant, is given in verse 29. "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." Paul had a lot of experience with savage wolves, with false teachers. Almost from the beginning of his ministry he was dealing with that. No sooner had he established the churches in Galatia in the southern part of Asia Minor on his first missionary journey and returned back to Antioch, then false teachers had come in with a false gospel.

And so Paul had to write the book of Galatians to correct the error of legalism, the idea that we are saved by faith plus works of the law. That's what these Judaizers taught. They came in and said, "Yes, Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Yes, He's the Savior, He's the Messiah.

"You must believe in Him. You can't be saved unless you believe in Him. But it's not enough. You must also be circumcised. You must also put yourself under the law. You must also obey it or you cannot be saved."

And so Paul writes the letter to them and said, "That's a different gospel. It's a false gospel. And anyone who preaches that gospel, that different gospel, whether he be an angel from hell or an

apostle himself, let him be anathema." Let him be a curse. Let him go to hell is what that means.

So Paul corrected that. But he understood that this is the nature of the situation. Where there are sheep there are wolves. The sheep are weak by themselves. They can't defend themselves. They are easy prey with the wild animals.

They need shepherds to watch over them and protect them. And Christians are just like that. We're weak. We are prone to wander and get in trouble just like sheep. And there are plenty of wolves in the world.

There are lots of false teachers ready to ravish wayward Christians, and Paul warns of this. Not just wayward Christians but naive Christians. And we begin that way; we begin with some naivety. So Paul tells the elders, "I know they are going to come and ravish this flock, so be on guard." 'Cause they will come from the most unexpected places.

They will come from within the church itself. Verse 30: "And from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." It doesn't surprise us, does it, that wolves would try to come into the flock from outside? We expect that. What surprises us is when a wolf arises from within the flock, from among ourselves.

But that's the nature of false teaching. It is ministers that do that. The great heretics of the church were ministers, some respected, very popular ministers. It arises within the church, and its messengers are clever men. They are wolves, Paul says, but they don't look like wild beasts, just the opposite.

Paul elaborates on all of that in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 which he had written, really, shortly before all of this, some months before he was giving this address. And Paul, in that passage, describes false teachers as "deceitful workers" who disguise "themselves as apostles of Christ, servants of righteousness." They profess to know the truth and to be giving the truth and to be good and Godly men. But what

they are is what Jesus describe them as being, "wolves in sheep's clothing."

Irenaeus fought heresy, particularly the early heresy of Gnosticism. And he wrote on the subject in the 2nd century in a work entitled *Against Heresies*. And he made a very insightful statement. He wrote that "Error is never set forth in its naked deformity," lest it be exposed. Instead it puts on "an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced more true than truth itself."

That's an insightful point he makes, "to the inexperienced." That's why we have elders in a church. Elders looks at the age of a man, the experience of a man, the knowledge of a man, where its overseer looks at the functions he's to be watching over in guarding those sheep so he can recognize error and false teachers when they come. Well, nothing has changed since the 1st century and the 2nd century, the time of Paul and the time of Irenaeus. Every generation faces its problem of error.

Carl Barth is a man with whom we would not agree on much that he taught – the late Carl Barth. But he was right when he said that the greatest enemy of the church today is not paganism but heresy. It seems to me, if you look at the church today, it is more concerned about paganism than it is about heresy, more concerned about what's going on in this immoral society in which we live, which doesn't seem to have any moral bearings at all. Its moorings in terms of morality have been lost and it's very concerned about the political movements that are going on today, concerned about things like fuzzy math.

That ought to be. I'm not discounting any of that. That is something we ought to be very concerned about. We ought to be politically astute. But it seems that the church is far less troubled about fuzzy ideas than it is about fuzzy math. And really, it is that which ought to be most concerning to us – bad theology.

A few years ago, there was an editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* entitled "The Church of What's Happening Now." It was

written by a journalist who was an Episcopalian. And he described the condition of his church and how it had departed from its standards and confessions of faith. He wrote, "Nowadays, Episcopalians in search of spiritual guidance are likely to be subjected to diatribes on foreign policy, recycling, rain forests or the Christian response to the threat of Jesse Helms." And he concludes by stating that "they wonder why their numbers decline every season."

Now, let me say this, that numbers can decline when we preach the truth and preach it clearly. Just read John chapter 6. Christ had a huge number of people, the feeding of the 5000. Multiply that by 3, you probably have the correct figure, about 15,000 to 20,000 people gathered there on the shores of Galilee. And by the time he was finished, everybody had left except the twelve disciples, and "One of them," He said, "is the devil." So the truth can drive people away.

But in this case what he saw, this Episcopalian journalist, is that not teaching truth, not teaching the Bible, not addressing the spiritual conditions of people was the consequence. And that seems to be a problem across the board. John Leith, a Presbyterian and former professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, wrote a book on the crisis in that church. David Wells of Gordon-Conwell Seminary has written books on the problem in evangelicalism. I've quoted some of his books on more than one occasion.

And he describes the apparent strength of numbers in evangelical churches as a mirage. And there are big churches with lots of numbers and lots of activity. But as he puts it, "It is a mile wide and an inch deep." Now all of this is a trumpet sounding. It is a warning, a call to vigilance.

We face the same dangers that the Ephesians faced. Paul's warning applies to us, as does his advice in verse 31. "Therefore be on the alert." And then he again reminds them of his ministry among them, how for three years he didn't "cease to admonish each one with tears." Night and day he did that.

No one ever had a more faithful pastor-teacher, a more faithful shepherd of their souls than the apostle Paul. But now he was going. He was leaving, and they must have been wondering what they would do without the apostle Paul. How would they cope with this great danger that was looming without him, without the apostle. They must have felt like children without a parent.

And Paul answers their concern in verse 32. "Now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace." Paul was leaving. Eventually, all of the apostles would depart this world. But one fact remains and it always remains, and that is the Lord. He never leaves. God was still with them and always would be and always will be with us.

And His Word was their possession. And it has the greatest effect upon the heart. It "is able to build up," he said, "and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." By that Word as it was accepted and obeyed, they would be sanctified. They would be built up in the faith by it, and they would be assured of the inheritance that they had with all of the people of God.

It is through that gospel that they enter into their inheritance. And as they read the gospel, read the Word of God, it gives them the assurance that that life, that inheritance can never be taken from them. So it gives hope for the future which gives great encouragement to continue in the faith and continue in the battle. And it gives wisdom in the present for how to do that, which will enable these Ephesian elders to discern error and detect false teachers that would enter the church. Those false teachers are clever.

Satan covers himself in light. But as they know the truth and trust the Lord, they would be able to deal effectively with him and his servants. Now, in order to reinforce his appeal to the elders, Paul reminds them again of his example among them of his integrity, as if to say, "You can trust what I'm saying by looking at my past. It is a selfless ministry. I'm not thinking of myself; I'm thinking only of you.

He never coveted their possessions, he said, never coveted their "silver or gold or clothes." In other words, his ministry among them was selfless. In no sense was it to his material gain. He had not exploited or taken advantage of anyone, just the opposite. This is very similar to Samuel's words to Israel in 1 Samuel chapter 12.

He came to the end of his ministry and he reviewed it. People had basically rejected Samuel. They didn't want him as their judge anymore. They wanted a king like all the nations had. And so he reviews with them his ministry among them.

He said to them, "Here I am. Bear witness against me. Whose ox have I taken? Whom have I defrauded." Did I ever take a bribe? "Bear witness against me."

They couldn't. No, they had to say, "you've done none of these things." Integrity is essential to the ministry. And if it's lost, the ministry is lost. And Paul, like Samuel, was saying, "I conducted myself with integrity, with honesty."

It was a selfless ministry. That is what the ministry required. And this is a reminder that those who take care of God's people must not do it for material gain. Paul had a right to be maintained in material things by the people to whom he ministered. He taught that in fact. "A laborer is worthy of his wages."

And Paul could have claimed that. Instead, he provided for himself and he provided for all of those who were with him. "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me." And I can just see Paul, as he's saying that, hold up his hands to these elders, this great scholar, and show them the hands of a laborer, rough and hardened. He did that. He labored in this way not to be a burden on them and to be an example to them, to teach them this fundamental fact about the ministry.

That it is a service of giving, not taking. Verse 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.' " The gospel is free. And with that word, Paul's exhortation to the elders ended.

The chapter concludes with an affectionate goodbye. They knelt down together in prayer. Weeping, they "embraced" the apostle Paul. They "repeatedly kissed him, grieving that they should see his face no more." Then they accompanied Paul to the ship and he departed.

They returned to Ephesus and carried on the work of the ministry. Things happened just as Paul said they would. We know that from Paul's letters, the later letters that he wrote, and the writings of John. At the end of Paul's life, he wrote in 2 Timothy 1:15 of a revolt against him. "All in Asia have deserted me," he said.

In the book of Revelation, the church of Ephesus in chapter 2 is rebuked for abandoning its first love. There's evidence from early church writings that the church of Ephesus repented as the Lord exhorted it to do in that book. And so that after the disruptions occurred the church responded and recovered. But the dangers Paul predicted were real, and they apply to us. No church can afford to feel that it has arrived and that it can rest.

We may grow in maturity and wisdom and knowledge and, hopefully, we will do that. But we are always existing at the front on the battle lines. There are always wolves about and, possibly, wolves within. What we are to do is be vigilant. Not to worry, not become preoccupied with the danger and fret about it and lose our joy.

We are to be awake; we are to be on guard but always we are to be rejoicing, Paul says. And we are to be going forward with confidence. The promise to the faithful Christian is that when we resist the devil he will flee from us because God's with us, and His Word is effective. Paul's address is specifically to elders. But, in principle, it applies to all of us.

We are to be alert. We are to be selfless in our Christian service to one another. We are to know God's Word. It is to our great advantage now but also in the future and for all eternity. To know

God's Word, to serve Him faithfully and selflessly and to look out for one another.

We have what Paul calls in verse 32, an "inheritance among all who are sanctified." And there is in that promise, in that great hope of an inheritance a reminder that those who are faithful to their task lay up for themselves treasures in heaven which are inherited. Jesus talks about that in Matthew 6:20. Paul didn't try to build a fortune in this world. That's what people do today, seek to build a fortune in this world as though if they can amass a fortune in this world everything will be secure and their whole lives will be fine and happy.

Paul did not do that. He didn't live in that way. He didn't covet people's gold. He cared for them, for the church that Christ died for and bought, and he served it; he served it selflessly. And that's what we are to be doing, serving the Lord and His people wholeheartedly.

The rewards are great, both now and forever. But there may be some here who have no assurance of that inheritance among the saints. You have not believed in Jesus Christ as God's Son and your Savior. Your future is grim. Judgment is what awaits the unbeliever.

"The wrath of God abides on him," Jesus said – John 3:36. There's a way of escape. Christ paid for the sins of His people, and you can know that you are one of His people, one of His elect by believing in Him. So it's simple. You don't need to puzzle over the hidden counsels of God.

We don't know who the elect are. But we do know this about the elect. They believe in Jesus Christ. And so if you are here without faith in Christ and you want to know if He died for you and you're one of the elect, believe in Him, trust in Him and you will be saved, saved at that very moment, forgiven of your sins, given an inheritance with the saints in life.

So as Paul preached everywhere to everyone, repent toward God and have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Do that and you will be saved. May God help you to do that, and may God help all of us to be vigilant. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness and your grace. And we thank you for your infinite love. You sent your Son into the world to die for sinners, and He did so at a heavy cost, the infinite price of His own blood. It took that, Father, to save sinners. And He did that for us. We thank you for it and pray that we would live lives that honor you. We thank you for your Son and for His death. And it's in His name we pray. Amen.