

BE SHEPHERDS OF THE CHURCH

Acts 20:1-38 (Key verse: 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.

The message is based on the book Acts chapter 20 verses 1 to 38. Key verse is verse 28 and it reads, “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.”

We saw in the previous passage that the Apostle Paul had resolved to go back to Jerusalem...19:21. Instead of sailing directly from Ephesus to Jerusalem, he took the long way round and passed through Macedonia and Greece. Let’s look at verses 1 through 3a, ending at “months” ...: When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. 2 He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, 3 where he stayed three months. Paul was about to return to Jerusalem from his mission field, in the region of Macedonia, Greece and some parts of Asia. We know how much Paul suffered spreading the gospel in those regions; he was arrested, despised, and always abused by his Jewish opponents. Paul also knows that these opponents will continue to torment the churches that he will be leaving behind. That is why he resolved to go through the region and spread a message of encouragement. Through this message, Paul seeks to prepare the elders of the churches for what lies ahead of them. It is as if he is telling them, “I have taught you the gospel and now it’s time for you to defend it.” Just as Jude admonishes elsewhere, “3 Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people. 4 For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.”

This is what Paul was worried about and his plan was to spread this message of encouragement from Ephesus all the way to Corinth, in Greece. He thereafter intended to sail directly from Greece to Syria, where we find Jerusalem. Look at verse 3b: because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. Paul’s plan was to voyage from Greece to Syria. However, the risk of being attacked by these Jews while he sailed over a long distance was high because a long journey would give them a lot of opportunities to attack him on the ship. For that reason, Paul decided to go back the way he came, through Macedonia and west Asia. Paul had some travel companions as seen in verse 4, who were going to Jerusalem with him as representatives of the various churches which he had pioneered. These men went ahead of Paul and Luke and five days later they all met in Troas. Despite these companions, Paul’s life was still in danger even after he had spread the message of encouragement. Notwithstanding, he did not give up or lose hope. This makes one wonder, “what was Paul’s secret? What kept him going?” Hold that question for now...

Look at verse 7: “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight” Here we have the evidence for why the orthodox church meets on Sundays for worship as opposed to Saturdays. The church met on Sundays historically because it is the day on which Jesus resurrected. That is why Paul does not teach anyone to observe the Sabbath in the NT. Now, since Paul intended to leave the next day, he kept on talking until midnight and because of the fumes emitted by the lamps used in that room, there was a young man named Eutychus who was seating in a window and was sinking into deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. In verse 9 it says: When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Most of us can understand and relate with Eutychus and why he fell asleep. Paul’s message was long because he wanted to teach a lot of things in a short space of time. We live in an era where we are overindulged, we are told that human beings have a short concentration span. As a result of that matters of truth even sermons in the church have become shorter and shorter over time. And yet, on the other hand we have this almost insatiable capacity to consume tik toks, reels, series on Netflix and watch hours and hours of movies. Eutychus fell asleep because the fumes made him drowsy, but we have perfect ventilation compared to then, and yet we still fall asleep even in sermons. I’m not sure why this happens to us. Be that as it may, Sunday is a great day for us Christians, we must ensure that we prepare for it—get enough sleep on Saturday night, wake early, have breakfast and

prepare your mind to come and listen to the word of God, which should be most important to us. Amen! Now, if we think that falling asleep is such a challenge to a speaker, the Apostle Paul's situation became worse when Eutychus toppled over the window and died. You'd think this would demotivate the Apostle or at least shake him. But no! he is not shaken, he is unmoved. What did he do next? Let's look at verses 10 through 12: 10 Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" 11 Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. 12 The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

Again, I will ask, what was Paul's secret? What kept him going? Paul has resurrection faith. The greatest fear for man is death. Resurrection faith is the believe in what Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die." The Apostle Paul was free from death- he did not have to worry about his life in everything that he did; thus he was able to do everything that God had called him to do. He had the freedom to do the best for God without worrying about himself losing his life. This is the place where we want to come as Christians: the natural man is driven by fear. In everything he does, he is worried that his life will be lost because it lies in his own hands. When we have resurrection faith, there is a certain confidence of triumphalism which accompanies everything that we do. Now, as Christians, we have been freed from the power of death—our lives are safely held in the hands of God never to be lost. This should give us the freedom to do things that honor God without worrying about our lives. For example, as students, we have the freedom to do our best in our exams because we know that the outcome thereof does not determine our life. But if we think that the outcome of our exams determines our lives, the mental strain and stress we carry will affect our ability to study and to do well in our exams. The worst thing that could happen to anyone is that they end up in hell...and Jesus overcame this for us. Thus we have the freedom to live a life that pleases God without worrying about the security of that life. This is why the Apostle can declare in verse 24: 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. He is not being apathetic or fatalistic about his life, he truly believes that he has nothing to lose because his life is in the hands of Christ. Amen!

The Apostle continued to travel with his companions in verses 13 through 16 until they reached Miletus. Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. Let's read verses 17 through 21: From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. 8 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 and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. 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." When the elders arrived, Paul defended his ministry before them, vindicating himself by telling them all that he did while he was with them. He described for them, the kind of a shepherd he was so that they will know what they will have to be to continue the work that he himself had started. They would have to be men of great humility, who weep for those who do not know Christ as well as the struggling immature believers in the wake of false teachers. More than that, they must be prepared to preach the message of repentance and faith in Jesus to everyone without discrimination. The church is in the business of saving souls through the proclamation of Jesus as LORD and Savior. Paul does not want these men to deviate from that requirement in his absence, because there are heavy consequences for those who mishandle the gospel about Jesus Christ. That is why he gives this warning in verses 25 through 27: "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 any of you. 27 For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God." It is such a dangerous thing to handle the gospel of Jesus Christ: if we don't proclaim the gospel in its fullness and according to the word of God, and if we distort it in any way for any reason; whether to manipulate the lives of others or to extort them, God will hold us accountable for their blood. Paul spoke at length about his life and ministry to these elders. He did this to use his life as an example and encouragement for the elders to understand what he is expecting from them.

What did Paul expect from the elders? Let's read today's key verse, 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. Paul expects the elders to be shepherds of the church of God. What does it mean to be a shepherd? A shepherd takes care of a flock of sheep by protecting, guiding and feeding them. Paul

wants the elders in the Ephesus church to be the same for the believers therein. How can these leaders be shepherds of the church? Firstly, it will help them to stay on the lookout, not only for those that are under them, but also for themselves. There are no super Christians or the ubiquitous “men of God” who are somehow above the rest of us mortals and are incapable of error. Paul is showing here that even leaders, even shepherds, must watch over themselves first, so that they can be able to watch over those that are under them. Leaders or shepherds are mere men who also struggle with sin, so it will be easier for them to protect those under them from danger or trouble if they themselves are protected. Thus, they must live a life of repentance and righteousness for the glory of God. And why is it necessary for the shepherds to protect the flock? Verses 29 and 30 tell us: 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. The shepherds must protect the flock because there are those individuals who distort the truth to gain disciples for themselves: they water down the gospel, reduce the meaning of sin and make the truth about hell seem incredulous or sadistic. We know some of these people and we don't like to talk about them—they preach about things that people want to hear and the church has to warn against such individuals. The need to protect the church from false teachers appears to be greater in our generation. This is evidenced by the rate at which “Discernment channels” are growing on YouTube and podcasts. These platforms serve to help to strengthen the church against false teachings by faithfully critiquing sermons using scripture—I believe it's one of the ways in which God blessed the church in our generation.

Secondly, it will help the elders to remember that the church belongs to God and that He bought it with His own blood. Jesus Christ died on the cross to redeem a people for His own name, and these people come into the church when they place their faith in Him for their salvation and righteousness. These saved ones are called the church, the ones who are called out of the world by God. God is the one who is building His church, and He alone is able to sustain and maintain it. The shepherds must not try and usurp the role of God by reducing the church into some systematic operation that is used to keep people inside by whatever means necessary, including the compromising of worship to meet worldly requirements as well as trying to maintain the church by mere humanistic commitment without trusting that God is really in control. That is why Paul says in 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.” Amen!

In conclusion,

Paul is leaving behind the churches which he pioneered through his various missionary journeys. He went around the region of Asia, Macedonia and Greece encouraging the churches and finally coming to the elders and calling them to be shepherds of the church. The shepherds are called to care for the flock, defend the truth of God against error and to protect the flock against false teachers. This is not an easy responsibility. We have seen through the life Paul how challenging it can be. How can anyone hope to be a shepherd of the church? We have learned that though the life of the Apostle Paul was marked by suffering and trials, he was able to continue and persist because he has resurrection faith. Therefore, anyone who will be a shepherd of God's church must have this resurrection faith—they must believe that Jesus took care of their worst possible alternative, and that even if they lose anything, they don't lose the worst thing they could ever lose, which is their life.

I also want to say, in closing, that Paul primarily focuses on elders and or shepherds in this passage and not everyone is an elder and not everyone is a shepherd. This might make us think that perhaps the text is not relevant or appropriate for some. Nevertheless, I hope that we have at least learned the power of resurrection faith as it should operate in every Christian. I also hope that we at least understand what a true shepherd of the church should look like. This will be helpful in allowing us to appreciate and verify the truthfulness of the shepherds under whom we sit as well as being able to find other faithful shepherds, should the LORD call us elsewhere where such a need arises. Amen!

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen!