

Paul's Farewell to the Ephesian Elders



Ice-Breaker

How do you say goodbye to people you love? Quick and painless? Long or drawn out? Weeping and wailing? Like it's no big deal? Other?



Scripture Passage

Acts 20:13-38

¹³We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul aboard. He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot. ¹⁴When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mitylene. ¹⁵The next day we set sail from there and arrived off Kios. The day after that we crossed over to Samos, and on the following day arrived at Miletus. ¹⁶Paul 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.

¹⁷From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ¹⁸When 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. ¹⁹I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. ²⁰You 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. ²¹I 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. ²³I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴However, 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. ²⁶Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. ²⁸Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.^a Be shepherds of the church of God,^b which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹So 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. ³³I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵In 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.'"

³⁶When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. ³⁷They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.

21 After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara.

^a [28] Traditionally bishops

^b [28] Many manuscripts of the Lord



Bible Study

1. Why "sail past" Ephesus to reach Jerusalem for Pentecost (see 2:1)?
2. What has characterized Paul's ministry so far? Why does he emphasize how he lived among them?
3. What kinds of hardships has Paul already encountered? How would you explain what motivates Paul to keep on (compare 20:24 with Philippians 3:7-8)?
4. What does it mean to "keep watch" (v. 28; see 1 Timothy 4:11-16)? How and why is their appointment as elders divine, humbling and dangerous (vv. 28-31)?
5. How does the message of grace (v. 32) and the example of Paul (vv. 33-35) protect them from these dangers? Some people viewed the office of elder as a way of gaining power and wealth (see 1 Timothy 6:6-10; 1 Peter 5:3). How does Paul oppose that idea here?
6. What do you suppose the Ephesians will miss about Paul?



Reference Notes

20:13-16 Luke traces Paul's four-day journey of about 100 miles from Troas to Miletus, where he addressed the elders of the Ephesian church.

20:19 Paul first calls the elders to recognize the pattern of ministry, marked by humble service, compassion, and endurance through suffering, that he had among them. This both proves his integrity and sets the standard which they should follow (see also 1 Corinthians 4:11-13; 2 Corinthians 7:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:6b-12). In the Greek world, humility was seen as a weakness; a sign of a slave. For Paul, however, who saw himself as a slave for God (Romans 1:1; Colossians 3:24), humility was essential for discipleship (Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:12).

20:20 Paul's ministry was the same whether in full view of the public (as in the school of Tyrannus; Acts 19:9) or in the confines of a small house church (the normal meeting place for groups of believers).

20:21 *repentance / faith.* While Paul might stress to Gentiles their need to turn from idols to God (Acts 17:29-30; 1 Thessalonians 1:9) and to Jews their need to have faith in God rather than in their own works for justification (Acts 13:39), repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin in terms of how one is to respond to God.

20:23 *in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.* Paul was undertaking this journey in full conviction that God wanted him to go, but also with an awareness that it would lead to difficulty. All along the way, the Spirit was preparing him for the hardships he would face at his destination. This sense of foreboding led him to ask the Roman church to pray for him as he went (Romans 15:30-32).

20:24 *finish the race.* Just prior to his death, Paul wrote to Timothy at Ephesus using this same metaphor to describe his ministry (2 Timothy 4:7). ***the gospel of God's grace.*** Just as repentance and faith sum up what it means to respond to God, so grace sums up the news of what God has done for us (Romans 5:1-11; Ephesians 2:8-9).

20:25 none of you ... will ever see me again. A few weeks earlier, Paul wrote to the Romans that after he went to Jerusalem he hoped to visit them and proceed to Spain since his work in Macedonia and Achaia (and presumably Asia) was accomplished (Romans 15:23). Whether this is why he says he will not see these people again or whether he subsequently felt that the warnings of the Spirit (v. 23) are to prepare him for death is uncertain.

20:26-27 Using the imagery from Ezekiel 33:1-6, Paul asserts he has been a faithful "watchman" and cannot be faulted for any problems that may arise in the church.

20:28 Keep watch over yourselves. This is echoed in Paul's call to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:16). The elders are to maintain vigilance over their own spiritual condition as well as that of the church. **the flock.** The Old Testament often used this image for Israel (Psalm 100:3; Isaiah 40:11). **overseers.** This word is translated elsewhere as "bishops." Elders, bishops and pastors are synonymous terms in the New Testament. They imply the responsibility of caring for the spiritual needs of others. **his own blood.** Since nowhere else in the New Testament is it said that God shed his blood, the phrase most likely refers to Jesus who is called God's "own Son" in Romans 8:32. (See also the NIV footnote.) Seeing this as a reference to Jesus means this sentence highlights the work of the Trinity in the life of the church: the church belongs to God who redeemed it through his Son and governs it through leaders appointed by his Spirit.

20:29-31 The call to be on the watch is necessary because, as Paul has learned through hard experience, there will come times of opposition both from without and from within. At this time, the external opposition was primarily from Jews (v. 19) while internal opposition arose through false teachers who claimed Paul's Gospel was insufficient (2 Corinthians 11:4-6).

20:32 the word of his grace. This does not mean the Bible per se, but "the message of the free bounty of God ... which has the greatest effect on the heart ... and so is able to build up the church" (Bruce). God's grace is the heartbeat of the Gospel and provides the key to understanding how one should respond to God and others.

20:33 silver or gold or clothing. Common symbols of wealth. The fact that Paul worked for a living while in Ephesus was proof that he never used his position to try to get anything from the people.

20:35 the words the Lord Jesus himself said ... This beatitude is not found in the Gospels. It is similar to a Greek proverb which Jesus may have adapted for his own use.

Caring Time

1. Suddenly, Paul is more the loving friend than hard-driving missionary. Has your preoccupation with the task of ministry ever caused you to miss out on loving people?
2. Who makes up the "flock" for whom you are responsible? In what specific way can you shepherd them?
3. How would you complete this sentence: "The one thing I must accomplish at any cost is _____?" How does it relate to Paul's goal in verse 24?
4. In the race of doing God's will, are you in the front of the pack, one of the stragglers, or an onlooker?