

Acts 20:17-38

1. Introductory comments
2. Observation and exposition
3. The take-away for us?

Introductory comments

1. What I said about Ed regarding Paul's speech to the Areopagus in Athens. Ed does not disagree with the apostle Paul, or think that Paul left out a critical part in his speech!
2. Why are we skipping chapters 18, 19, and half of 20?
3. This passage is probably my favorite out of the entire Bible, if I had to pick just one. I've probably read it hundreds, or maybe thousands of times, over the past 20-some years, especially after I became more involved in church life.

Observation and exposition

4. Read the passage [SLIDES]
5. Observation and exposition
 - a. The time and setting [SLIDES]
 - i. Nearing the end of Paul's third missionary journey.
 - b. Initial observations, borrowed from John Stott:
 - i. Out of all the speeches in Acts, and there are quite a few, this is the only speech which is addressed to Christians, and that in itself is notable enough to merit special attention from us, because, as I will argue at the end, it is addressed to us as much as it was to the Ephesian elders.
 - ii. The terms used to describe the leaders of the Ephesian church: [SLIDES]

elders (17), shepherds/pastors (28), and overseers (28). **Elder** is a word borrowed from the Jewish synagogue, and is used throughout the book of Acts as the primary title of the primary leaders of the church. **Overseer** is a word borrowed from Greek contexts, and is used less frequently than 'elder'. It describes one particular function of elders: "to look at, examine, inspect, visit" the church. **Shepherds or pastors** describes the primary and most important role that elder/overseers have: the care, feeding, and protection of the church.

- iii. There were multiple elders, not just one man working by himself, and they functioned as a team. Throughout the book of Acts, and the New Testament, elders in local churches are described as being a plurality - more than one. They may have different individual tasks according to their spiritual gifts and abilities, but they all share the same responsibility of caring for the church they are assigned to by the Holy Spirit, and according to Hebrews 13:17 they will each give an account to God for how they did or didn't handle that responsibility.
 - iv. Luke was there and heard the speech himself. The similarities of themes in this speech and Paul's letters to the churches are many: the grace of God (24, 32), the kingdom of God (25), the purpose or will of God (27), the redeeming blood of Christ (28), repentance and faith (21), the church of God and its edification (28, 32), the inevitability of suffering (23-24), the danger of false teachers (29-30), the need for vigilance (28, 31), running the race (24), and our final inheritance (32).
- c. Paul sends for the Ephesian elders **(17-18a)**
 - i. Ephesus was about 30 miles from Miletus, so it probably took three days for a messenger to go to Ephesus and bring back the elders to Paul in Miletus.
- d. Paul's past ministry in Ephesus **(18b-21)**
 - i. Why does he take the time to remind them of his ministry efforts while he was in Ephesus?
 - 1. We as humans tend to forget things, and we need to be reminded.
 - 2. Paul and the gospel had enemies who would come in to a city and the church after he left and try to undo his work. This happened in Thessalonica and Corinth, and he knew it would happen in Ephesus also, if it hadn't already begun in the time since he had left Ephesus.
 - ii. Paul's first priority in Ephesus? (And everywhere he went?)
 - 1. Preaching - "declaring to you"
 - 2. Teaching
 - iii. The content of his preaching and teaching?
 - 1. The gospel - "repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ"
 - 2. Two sides of the same coin
 - 3. "Genuine faith demands repentance, and sincere repentance will continue to flow from saving faith." Peterson, 565 **[SLIDE]**

e. Paul's future prospects (22-27)

- i. Suffering and afflictions, but he didn't care!
 - 1. Self-preservation was not a priority of Paul's. Should it be one of ours?
 - a. Think about it: how much time, effort, and resources to we pour into self-preservation? While this is a natural tendency, does that make it right?
- ii. Note the balance and/or tension between God's sovereignty and Paul's responsibility.
 - 1. Compare with Paul's description of his life and effort in **Colossians 1:28-29**. [SLIDE]
 - 2. By extension, I'd argue that this should be the mindset of every elder (or pastor, or overseer - the label doesn't matter here) in how they fulfill their God-given task of shepherding the church.
- iii. This is only one of two times in Acts that Luke uses the word "gospel," though the verb form, "evangelize," is used extensively. Typically, the gospel in Acts is called "the word."
 - 1. For example, see **19:10**: "the word of the Lord"

f. Paul's charge or exhortation to the elders (28-35)

- i. "Pay careful attention to..."
 - 1. In other words, be deliberate or intentional. This is not something that can be left to chance.
 - 2. There are similarities here to what Paul wrote to Timothy who was in Ephesus at the time of that letter.
 - a. "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." **1 Timothy 4:16** [SLIDE]
- ii. The church as a flock of sheep, and specifically, God's flock of sheep.
 - 1. Compare with **Psalms 100:3**, as just one of many examples in the Old Testament [SLIDE]
- iii. "to care for the church of God" = be shepherds
 - 1. "Each congregation which is brought into existence because of the saving work of Jesus is precious to God and should be so treated by those appointed to be its leaders!" Peterson, 569 [SLIDE]
- iv. Note the theology in **verse 28**, expressed as a trinitarian emphasis
 - 1. The church of God (the father)
 - 2. The blood of Jesus Christ
 - 3. The oversight of the Holy Spirit
- v. "fierce wolves" = false teachers
 - 1. **2 Timothy 2:23-26** [SLIDE]

2. 2 Timothy 4:1-4 [SLIDE]

- vi. Peterson quote on **verse 30**, “from among your own selves” [SLIDE]
- vii. “God and the word of his grace” (32)
 - 1. F. F. Bruce quote [SLIDE]
 - 2. David Peterson quote [SLIDE]
- viii. A final warning about using their position as elders for personal gain (33-35)
 - 1. This doesn’t mean that churches should not support (pay) their elders/pastors who labor in preaching and teaching, since Paul did endorse or teach that in some of his letters. Rather, it is a warning about greed and covetousness, and how easy it is to fall to those sins.
 - 2. Paul did not have a salary, a benefits package, or a retirement account. Just saying...
- g. Farewell and good-byes (36-38)

The take-aways for us

- 1. The thoroughness of Paul’s example. As John Stott, says, Paul taught everyone (Jews and Greeks) everything (the whole counsel of God) in every way (in public and from house to house).
- 2. The double duty of elders: feed the sheep (by teaching God’s word) and protecting them from wolves (false teachers) (by warning them of error and twisted truth, as Paul says in verse 30).

“This emphasis is unpopular today. We are frequently told always to be positive in our teaching, and never negative. But those who say this have either not read the New Testament or, having read it, they disagree with it. For the Lord Jesus and his apostles refuted error themselves and urged us to do the same. One wonders if it is the neglect of this obligation which is a major cause of today’s theological confusion. If, when false teaching arises, Christian leaders sit idly by and do nothing, or turn tail and flee, they will earn the terrible epithet ‘hirelings’ who care nothing for Christ’s flock. Then too it will be said of believers, as it was of Israel, that ‘they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and . . . they became food for all the wild animals.’” John Stott, 328-329 [SLIDE]

- 3. The value of the people in the church. Each and every Christian church is God’s church, and every believer in those churches, was purchased with the blood of Christ, and watched over by the Holy Spirit through his overseers whom he has appointed, as Paul says in verse 28. There is nothing more valuable in the universe than the church and the

people in it, and there is no more important task than the care, feeding, and protection which is what each and every elder/overseer/pastor/shepherd has been tasked with.

4. Paul's charge or exhortation to the Ephesian elders is a charge to church leaders everywhere, from back then until Christ returns in the future, and is a charge to churches and church members everywhere as to what they should rightly expect from their leaders, no matter what "titles" those leaders have - elders, overseers, pastors, shepherds, or simply leaders.
5. And finally, this is my last Sunday teaching this class...

Resources

1. *The Acts of the Apostles*, F. F. Bruce, 1990
2. *The Book of the Acts*, F. F. Bruce, 1988
3. *The Acts of the Apostles*, David G. Peterson
4. *The Message of Acts*, John Stott
5. *The Acts of the Apostles*, Ben Witherington III
6. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, F. F. Bruce