**The Apostle Paul Says Goodbye**

(Acts 20:17-27)

An elderly woman heard that her friend had just lost her husband, so she paid her a visit to find out what happened. Her friend said, “Well, he was in the hospital, and he suddenly needed a blood transfusion, and I didn’t know his blood type. So all I could do was sit with him and say goodbye. I’ll never forget how *supported* he was. He just kept on telling me, “Be positive. Be positive.”

Speaking of saying goodbye, here in Acts 20 the apostle Paul is leaving Asia, and he knows he’s never going to see the leaders of the Ephesian church again. So he’s about to bid them a very *touching* goodbye. The story begins in Acts 20:17, where it says of Paul,

**“And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.”**

Now when it says Paul called for “the elders” there, it’s not saying he called *all the old men.* You understand that he’s talking about the spiritual leaders of the church, like when Peter wrote,

**“The *elders* which are among you I exhort, *who am also an elder...”* (I Peter 5:1).**

Peter was *the* leader of the Jewish kingdom church, but he was writing to some *other* leaders of the Jewish kingdom church.

But these leaders here in Acts 20 were leaders of the *grace* church in Ephesus. They were *very* dear to Paul, for he had spent three years ministering to them. So it says in verse 18,

**“And when they were come to him, he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons” (Acts 20:18).**

Since Paul was talking to spiritual leaders, he’s going to begin his farewell address by reminding them of the kind of leader that *he himself* had been among them. He knew that a *good* leader has to lead *by example,* and he’s about to describe *his* example in verse 19, where he says he had spent his time with them

**(Serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews” (Acts 20:19).**

Now “humility” is the noun form of the adjective *humble,* and both of those words mean to not think too much of yourself. They’re both the opposite of *pride,* and the Bible has a lot of warnings about the pitfalls of pride. Perhaps the most famous one is found in Proverbs 16:18, where Solomon wrote,

**“Pride goeth before *destruction…”***

When an *unbeliever* is filled with pride, he thinks so much of himself that he thinks he doesn’t need God to save him.

**“The wicked, *through the pride of his countenance,* will not seek after God: *God is not in all his thoughts”* (Psalm 10:4).**

But pride will make a mess of your life as a believer as well. Solomon wrote of men in general,

**“A man's pride *shall bring him low”* (Proverbs 29:23).**

So the minute you start thinking you’re all that, as they say, just remember that verse, and the line from that old Beatles song that says, “Pride will hurt you too.” Hey, if a bunch of longhaired hippies knew that 60 years ago, you should know it too. And you should do what James says to do in James 4:10:

***“Humble yourselves* in the sight of the Lord, *and He shall lift you up”***

But back under the law of Moses, there came a time when the Jews *refused* to humble themselves—so God did it for them. As Moses told them,

**“the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, *to humble thee...”* (Deuteronomy 8:2).**

I bet they found forty years of stumbling around in the wilderness *very* humbling!

But today, in the dispensation of grace, God is not going to make *you* stumble around in some kind of *spiritual* wilderness in your life to humble you. I don’t care what you’re going through in life, *God didn’t send it.* He’s not sending troubling times to humble His people today. That’s not what He’s up to during the dispensation of grace.

But if *you* refuse to humble yourself, like the Jews refused under the law, you’ll find that things will happen in life that will do it for you. I know I find this to be true. I work very hard on my Sunday messages during the week, and just about every Sunday I say something stupid, or even wrong. I find that *very* humbling. And if you live long enough, you’re going to find life will humble you as well.

Now verse 19 *also* says that Paul served the Ephesians with many tears and temptations which befell him by something he calls “the lying in wait of the Jews.” That’s a Bible phrase that refers here to how those unsaved Jews were constantly trying to *ambush* him *and kill him.*

And that’s what caused the “tears” Paul mentions. He *wept* over them, the way the Lord wept over Jerusalem when the unsaved Jews *there* kept trying to kill *Him.* Luke 19:41,42 says,

**“...when He was come near, He beheld the city, *and wept over it,* Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.”**

The Lord wept over Jerusalem because He was trying to *save them,* and they were trying to *kill Him.* And Paul was trying to save the unsaved Jews in Ephesus, and they were trying to kill *him.*

That made it so Paul was tempted to *quit.* That’s what verse 19 means when it talks about the “temptations” that their lying in wait caused him. But in spite of all that, Paul did what he said in Acts 20:20:

**“And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house.”**

And the thing that was “profitable” to them, of course, was *the Word of God.* Paul wrote,

**“*All scripture*...is profitable...” (II Timothy 3:16).**

So when Paul says he kept back nothing that was profitable to them, he meant that he didn’t just teach *some* of the Scriptures, *he taught them all.*  Some churches only teach the four gospels, and some *grace* churches only teach Paul’s epistles, but I do what Paul did and teach *all* Scripture. I know Paul’s epistles are written specially to us today, but I don’t keep back anything that will profit the spiritual lives of my hearers.

Verse 20 also says that Paul taught the Word publicly. That’s a reference to his ministry in the school of Tyrannus that we read about in the previous chapter. Paul also taught the Scriptures “from house to house.” I spend a lot of time teaching men who live in what’s called “the big house,” AKA “the gray bar motel.” Every week I teach God’s Word to thieves, drug dealers and killers in their prison houses. And for the past couple of years, I’ve been teaching a free man who lives in a house in New Zealand, halfway around the world from where I live, through my email ministry. Not a week goes by that I don’t receive two or three questions from this dear brother.

And while Paul was teaching these elders, he was also doing something he talks about in verse 21, where he reminds them that in Ephesus he’d spent time

**“Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).**

Now “testifying” is what you do when you go to court, right? And the same was so in ancient Israel. Moses told his Jewish countrymen,

**“Whoso killeth any person, the murderer shall be put to death by the mouth of witnesses: but one witness shall not *testify* against any person to cause him to die” (Numbers 35:30).**

If you’re a witness in a court case such as this, you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and someone’s life hangs in the balance. But when we do what Paul did here and testify to men about their need to repent and put their faith in Christ, their *eternal* lives hang in the balance.

If you’re reading these words and you’re not saved, Paul says you need to *repent.* Just be sure you understand what he meant by that. The word “repent” just means *to change your mind,* as we see when the Lord began a parable by saying,

**“A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he *repented,* and *went”* (Matthew 21:28,29).**

In other words, he said he would go, but repented and changed his mind. And if you’re not saved, you need to change your mind *about God.* Because I guarantee you, whatever you think about God *is wrong.* I can say that because God says,

**“...*My thoughts are not your thoughts,* neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD” (Isaiah 55:8).**

Most people think you have to be good to please God and go to heaven, right? Recently on my drive to *Berean Bible Society* I was channel surfing the radio, and heard one of the dead teenager songs that were popular in the ‘60s. This one featured a guy whose girlfriend had died in a car crash, and he sang, “Where, oh where can my baby be? The Lord took her away from me. She’s gone to heaven—” Do you remember the rest of the song? “So I’ve got to be good, so I can see my baby when I leave this world.” That’s what the world of unsaved men think!

But God says that being good *ain’t good enough!* You have to be *perfect* to go to heaven, and only *Christ* was perfect. But He died to *make you* perfect in God’s eyes. So repent of whatever else you think about God and heaven, and put your faith in what Christ did for you on Calvary’s cross.

That was the gospel that Paul was bound and determined to preach, as we see as we read on in our text:

**“And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there” (Acts 20:22).**

Now that small letter “s” on the word “spirit” there tells you that Paul wasn’t talking about the *Holy* Spirit there. He was talking about his *own* spirit. We saw the same thing back in Acts 19:21, where it says,

**“After these things were ended, *Paul purposed in the spirit...*to go to Jerusalem.”**

So the *Holy* Spirit wasn’t telling Paul to go to Jerusalem. He felt bound to go all on his own. And we know *why* he was so hot and bothered to get to Jerusalem. He’d been collecting a lot of money from Gentile churches for poor Jews in Jerusalem, and wild horses couldn’t keep him from delivering that money to those poor saints who so desperately needed it.

Now it’s true he could have just sent some trustworthy men to deliver it. But when he handed that money over to those poor Jews, I think he was hoping for what the world calls a photo op. He wanted to be able to preach to *unsaved* Jews in Jerusalem as he handed all that cash to the *saved* Jews in the Jerusalem church.

You see, all that unsaved Jews knew about Paul is that he had turned his back on Judaism. They considered him a turncoat and a traitor to the Jewish faith, someone who didn’t give a *hoot* about Jews, and was off preaching to Gentiles. But if they saw Paul deliver a boatload of money to poor saved Jews, do you think maybe that would make them think about repenting and putting their faith in Christ? I bet Paul thought so!

All of that explains what it says in the verse just prior to our text, where Luke wrote,

**“Paul had determined to sail by Ephesus, because he would not spend the time in Asia: for he hasted, if it were possible for him, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost” (Acts 20:16).**

Paul wasn’t hurrying to get to Jerusalem so he could *observe* the Jewish feast of Pentecost, as some surmise. He hastened to get to Jerusalem for Pentecost because he knew what always *happens* at Pentecost. As Luke wrote earlier,

**“...when the day of Pentecost was fully come...there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews...*out of every nation under heaven”* (Acts 2:1-5).**

*That’s* why Paul was all hot and bothered to get to Jerusalem for Pentecost. It was to get the chance to let Jews *from all over the world* see him hand that money to those poor Jews, and then *testify* to them!

And that explains why Paul did what he did in the opening verses of our text in Acts 20:17,18:

**“...from Miletus he *sent* to Ephesus, and *called* the elders of the church. And when *they* were come *to him,* he said...”**

Paul sailed right past Ephesus, and had the elders meet him on his way to Jerusalem so he wouldn’t have to go out of his way and perhaps make it in time for Pentecost. He was bound and determined that he was going to do more than just *cry* over Jerusalem. He was going to testify the gospel of God’s grace to the city!

But why would Paul end verse 22 by saying he didn’t know what would befall him in Jerusalem? Did he think they’d hurt him for giving them money? I don’t know about you, but that’s never been my experience when I’ve given people money! Well, we find out as we read on in our text. After saying he didn’t know what would befall him in Jerusalem, he added,

**“Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me” (Acts 20:23).**

The Holy Ghost told him if he went to Jerusalem, he’d continue to suffer the bonds and afflictions he was areadly enduring in places where he *wasn’t* giving people money.

And “bonds” was a reference to getting *cuffed and arrested,* while “afflictions” in this context referred to the *beatings* a man often experienced when he was arrested, as Paul did in Philippi.

You know, you and I are sometimes afraid to serve the Lord because we’re afraid of what *might* happen to us if we do. Paul knew something *would* happen to him—he had the Holy Spirit’s word on it! But as we read on in Acts 20, we see that *Paul didn’t care!* In a grand declaration of faith, he said,

**“But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).**

The ides of being beaten and jailed didn’t move Paul in the slightest. We know that even if the Spirit had said he’d be *killed* in Jerusalem, he’d still have gone for he added, “neither count I *my life* as dear unto myself.” He was bound and determined *to finish his course.* That tells you that this was about more than just delivering some collection money. The course he was on was the same course he’d *been* on since the day the Lord saved him on the road to Damascus, the course of testifying the gospel of the grace of God.

But now it was time for Paul to share some bad news with these Ephesian elders. In verse 25 he said,

**“And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more” (Acts 20:25).**

Now here, the “kingdom” Paul had gone preaching in Ephesus wasn’t the kingdom of heaven on earth that Jewish kingdom saints will dwell in eternally. That was Israel’s hope, not theirs! He was talking about the kingdom that Paul wrote to the Colossians about when he said,

**“…the Father…hath delivered us from the power of darkness, *and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son”* (Colossians 1:12,13).**

Notice Paul uses the past tense there. That means whatever kingdom he’s talking about, it’s *not* the one with lambs and lions living together that Jewish kingdom saints will enter after the Tribulation. It’s a kingdom we’re already part of. He’s talking about the unseen, overall kingdom of God that includes the saved of all ages. So don’t be praying “Thy kingdom come,” because the kingdom *came to you* the moment you got saved. You’re already in it! As the credit card companies say, “You’re *pre-approved* for the kingdom of God in heaven!” You just haven’t moved in yet.

But here we have to ask how Paul knew they’d never see his face again. It could be that he was just not planning any more trips to Ephesus. But the way he seems so *definite* about it, I think it was because he was a prophet, and prophets knew the future, of course.

But if Paul knew the future, how come he *didn’t* know what would befall him in Jerusalem? I think the answer is that Paul was experiencing the same thing the Prophet Elisha experienced in II Kings 4:27. He said,

**“...her soul is vexed within her: *and the LORD hath hid it from me,* and hath not told me” (II Kings 4:27).**

As you can see, God didn’t always let His prophets know *everything.* And here, I don’t think God wanted Paul to know what would befall him in Jerusalem. I think God wanted to know how faithful Paul would be if he didn’t know what serving Him would *cost* him.

Because that’s what God wants to know about *us,* and Acts is a book of transition from how things were under prophecy to how they are for us under the mystery. Hey, life would be a whole lot easier if we always knew what it would cost us to be faithful to the Lord—but we don’t. Pretty much all we know is what Paul knew: that bonds and afflictions will abide us.

Of course, you may never be beaten and arrested for serving God. But look how that word “bond” is used in Luke 12:11-16:

**“...there was a woman which had *a spirit of infirmity*...And when Jesus saw her, He...said...*thou art loosed from thine infirmity...*And the ruler of the synagogue...because...Jesus had healed on the sabbath day...said unto the people... come and be healed...*not* on the sabbath day. The Lord then answered...ought not this woman...be loosed from this *bond* on the sabbath day?”**

As you can see, the word “bond” there refers to an infirmity in the flesh, a sickness of some kind. And I don’t know what’s going to ultimately befall you in life, but I do know that bonds of infirmities are going to continue to abide you. Now, knowing you can’t expect a healer to come along and heal you in this dispensation, do you still want to be faithful to the Lord?

You know, you should be as concerned about your track record of serving the Lord as Paul was. He went on in our text to say,

**“Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men” (Acts 20:26).**

Paul is quoting Ezekiel 3:18 here, where God said,

**“When I say unto the wicked, *Thou shalt surely die;* and thou givest him not warning...*his blood will I require at thine hand...”***

But how could Paul say he was pure from the blood *of all men,* if he hadn’t *warned* all men of the danger of dying without Christ? The answer is found in what Paul says in the last verse of our text:

**“For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).**

Paul could say he was pure from the blood of all men *“for”* he had not shunned to declare all the counsel of God *to those elders.* Once he gave God’s counsel to leaders who he knew would then give it to others, who in turn would give it to others, he was free from the blood of all men. He’d done his job as an apostle.

But the thing about “the counsel of God” is—it changes! Look what it says in Luke 7:29,30:

**“...all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, *being baptized with the baptism of John.* But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected *the counsel of God* against themselves, being *not* baptized of him”**

When John the Baptist was God’s man of the hour, all the counsel of God included water baptism. But once God made *Paul* His man of the hour, all the counsel of God *no longer* included water baptism. And understanding things like that is what makes our church unique. We’re worth the trip, as they used to say in those Dunkin’ Donuts commercials!

In closing, I’d like to say one more thing about that word “record” in verse 26. Did you know God is keeping a record of everything men do through the ages? Moses said,

**“Gather unto me *all the elders*...that I may speak these words in their ears, and call heaven and earth *to record* against them” (Deuteronomy 31:29).**

God’s keeping a record of everything that men do, and somehow heaven and earth are doing the recording! At least that’s how I read that verse. There’s other places in Scripture where inanimate objects record words anyway.

But if that’s true, what’s John mean when he says,

***“I saw a great white throne,* and Him that sat on it, from whose face *the earth and the heaven fled away;* and there was found no place for them” (Revelation 20:11).**

If heaven and earth flee away at the Great White Throne judgment, how is God going to judge unsaved men if His records suddenly disappear? We find out in the next verse:

**“And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; *and the books were opened:* and another book was opened, which is the book of life: *and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books”* (Revelation 20:12).**

The works of unsaved men are *also* recorded in some books. God evidently believes in backing up his hard drive. And together with the book of eternal life, that will give Him the 2 or 3 witnesses His law requires to condemn men to an eternity in the lake of fire. He started out with 2 or 3, lost heaven and earth, but will still end up with 2 or 3 in His infinite wisdom.

But God’s *also* keeping records of what *believers* do, so He can *reward* us, not condemn us. We see a picture of the rewards that Jewish kingdom saints will receive in Esther 6:13, when

**“...*the book of records...*were read before the king. And it was found written, that Mordecai had told of...two...who sought to lay hand on the king....And the king said, *What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?”***

Morty had foiled an assassination attempt on the king’s life, and needed to be rewarded for it—just as all Jewish kingdom saints will be eternally someday.

But *we too* will be rewarded for faithfully serving the Lord. But when Paul *describes* the Judgment Seat of Christ, he doesn’t mention any books. So I think that we’re all going to do what Paul did here, and give a record of *ourselves* in that day. Isn’t that what Paul says in Romans 14:12?

**“...every one of us shall give account *of himself* to God”**

I mean, it’s not like you’ll be able to *lie* once you’re in heaven. You’ll have a glorified body and a new nature that is completely free of your old nature, so you’ll be physically *incapable* of misrepresenting the facts when you give an account of yourself. Now I know that Christians like to think that God’s going to review their lives on a big screen TV, but that’s not what Paul says.

But let me ask you: Doesn’t the Judgment Seat of Christ follow the dispensation of grace? Yes! Well, didn’t we see a type of the dispensation of grace in our last study in Acts 20:6-12? Well, here we’re seeing a picture of the Judgment Seat of Christ following that picture of the dispensation of grace!

I believe that someday we’ll all stand before the Lord and talk about how faithful we were, just as Paul pictures for us here in this passage—and how much *more* faithful we *could* have been.

You know, Paul said he wasn’t going to let bonds and afflictions stop him from serving the Lord. May I ask what it takes to stop you? I ask because you can measure your Christianity by what it takes to stop you.

Back in the 1700s, an Englishman named Jonas Henway was traveling in Persia, where they were using umbrellas to shade themselves from the sun. That’s actually what they were invented for. The word “umbrella” actually means *little shade.* But Jonas thought that this contraption might be something that could also help with the constant British rain once he returned home, so he started carrying one in England.

But 300 years ago, no one carried an umbrella for rain in England, so he was positively *ridiculed.* Young boys pelted him with rotten eggs and cabbages. But he stuck to his guns *for 30 years.* And the umbrella finally caught on! And for hundreds of years after, no proper English gentleman would leave the house without one.

So don’t let a little ridicule stop *you.* Paul didn’t! They mocked him on Mars Hill for talking about the resurrection. But verse 24 of our text here says he didn’t let *anything* move him away from serving the Lord. So if you want to finish *your* course “with *joy,”* and not regret, don’t let anything stop you from serving the Lord either.