

BE SHEPHERDS OF GOD'S FLOCK

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.

This passage describes the last leg of Paul's third missionary journey. His farewell address to the Ephesian elders is the focus of the passage. Through his personal testimony, we learn the beautiful life of a shepherd. He said to the leaders, "Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." May the Lord help us to be shepherds of God's flock!

I. INTERNATIONAL JOURNEY TEAM (1-7)

When the riot in Ephesus ended, Paul sent for the disciples. He encouraged them to keep on preaching the gospel of Jesus. Then he said goodbye to them and set out for Macedonia. As he traveled through that area, he spoke many words of encouragement to the people (2). No doubt he told them to remain true to faith in Jesus Christ and share the gospel with those who did not know Jesus. Finally, he arrived in Greece where he stayed three months (3). We believe that it was in Corinth and there he wrote the book of Romans. He was determined to carry the gospel to Rome, the center of the world at that time. But he had to go to Jerusalem first to deliver the relief offerings that the Gentile churches collected for the Jewish brothers and sisters in Judea. So he decided to write a letter to those who were in Rome. This letter became a very important book for Christians, as it teaches us how a sinful person can be saved. To summarize it in one sentence, we are saved only by faith in Jesus who died on the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and who was raised from the dead on the third day. Paul said in the letter, "... I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Ro 1:15-16). He was writing the letter in Corinth on the Peloponnese peninsula, but his mind was already in Rome, across the Adriatic Sea. He envisioned the gospel of Jesus Christ spreading from Rome to the world like a wild fire.

Before going to Rome, however, he had an important task to take care of. He wanted to connect the Gentile churches and the mother church in Jerusalem by delivering the relief offerings. He was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost (16). The fastest way to get there was to catch one of many charter ships that carried Jewish pilgrims over the Mediterranean Sea to Jerusalem. But he learned that some Jews were plotting to kill him on the sea. So he decided to go back through Macedonia (3). Look at verse 4. "*He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia.*" In addition to these seven men, the author Luke was part of Paul's journey team going to Jerusalem (notice "we" in

verse 6). They were the representatives of the churches Paul had planted. By bringing to Jerusalem the Gentile Christian leaders and the relief offerings from their churches (Ro 15:25-27), Paul wanted to share God's vision of world salvation with Jewish Christians. He assembled an international team for the purpose. Paul knew that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were suffering from their tunnel vision and narrow-mindedness. He wanted them to see how God was doing his mighty work among the Gentiles by presenting the living witnesses.

II. ALL-NIGHT WORSHIP AT TROAS (8-12)

Paul and his team came to Troas. This is where Paul had first seen the vision of the Macedonian man (Ac 16:9). Something happened there that reveals the character of the early church. The church met on the first day of the week, that is Sunday, to break bread (7). Jews observed the Sabbath on Saturday, as did Jesus. But we worship God on Sunday because Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday (Lk 24:1). Jesus' resurrection was the dawn of a new era in which God revealed his victory over death and opened the way for all believers to enter the kingdom of God.

The worship service at Troas was not well structured like ours is today. They didn't have a praise and worship team with sound equipment. They didn't have a church building. But one thing they had was the word of God. They worshiped God in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24). The believers were excited because they had a special messenger for their worship. Paul delivered a passionate message to them, because he was leaving the next day. He was eager to share the word of God with them. His message was long. It lasted until midnight. Most attendants were from a working-class people. They were tired. But they were eager to hear the word of life from Paul. They loved the word of God.

The place where they were meeting was an upstairs room. They needed many lamps to light the room for the service. The lamps depleted oxygen steadily. It was warm, smoky and stuffy. There was no air conditioning. A young man named Eutychus was trying to stay awake to hear the sermon. He was very tired and sleepy. He sat on a windowsill to get fresh air. Still it was hard for him to stay awake. As Paul talked on and on, his eyes became heavy and he began to doze off. In a moment, he fell to the ground and died. It was a potentially disastrous moment for Paul. It was his fault that the young man was dead. But he did not panic. He went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" (10) God did not leave his servant Paul alone in frustration when he was trying to feed his flock with the word of God. He raised Eutychus from the dead. God turned their sorrow into joy. The potential tragedy was turned into a testimony of God's grace and power.

Look at verse 11. *"Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left."* Their worship service continued. Paul preached until daylight. Probably no one dozed off after what happened to Eutychus. They were greatly comforted by what God did to the young man and strengthened by the word of God (12).

III. PAUL'S MESSAGE TO THE EPHESIAN ELDERS (13-38)

Leaving Troas, Paul and his team got onboard a ship and set sail toward the Mediterranean Sea. They sailed past Ephesus intentionally to avoid spending time in Asia Minor. Paul was in a hurry to go to Jerusalem (16). He knew that if he stopped at Ephesus, it would be difficult for him to pull himself away from his dear coworkers (21:1). After landing at Miletus, about 50 miles to the south, and he sent for the Ephesian elders. Verses 18-35 describe his farewell to them. He knew that this was the last time he would speak to them in person. His farewell was both a personal testimony and a charge to the elders. Unlike other messages of Paul, this was a message delivered to the leaders only. It was a deeply moving message. What can we learn from his message?

First, I served the Lord with great humility. Look at verse 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.”* In Ephesus, Paul labored for three years to raise up disciples of Jesus. This was not a humanitarian effort. He served the Lord Jesus. His purpose was clear. He wanted to please the Lord Jesus by sharing the gospel with the disciples. And he did so with great humility. What does it mean to be humble? How can we be humble in serving the Lord? Sometimes we have this mistaken notion that we are humble if we are gentle, not out-spoken and we don't exercise authority over others. The best example of humbleness is found in our Lord Jesus. He is the Son of God, but he humbled himself to come to this world to serve sinners with humility. He humbled himself to the point of giving his life on the cross in obedience to God's will. But I want to talk about another humble person today. The Bible says that Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth (Nu 12:3). Moses grew up as a prince of Egypt. He was trained by God for 40 years to be a good shepherd. He had many leadership qualities. He was decisive, brave and full of wisdom. Once he commanded 3,000 Israelites to be killed on the spot for their sin of idol worship (Ex 32:28). So how was Moses humble? He honored God as God by obeying the word of God. Unlike his brother Aaron and sister Miriam who tried to promote themselves with selfish ambition, Moses humbly obeyed the word of God. The Lord used him greatly because of his humility. We learn that God can use us greatly if we humble ourselves by obeying his word.

A young man graduated from West Point and became an army officer. He was full of self-confidence. He was so meticulous and perfect in all matters that his fellow officers and soldiers did not like him. Because of the conflicts, he ended up resigning from his position. He went home and became a farmer, learning how to be humble. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, he joined the Union Army as a foot soldier. This time he served his duty with humility. Everyone liked him because he was humble. And he began to rise rapidly in rank. President Lincoln promoted him to Lieutenant General. Do you know who this man was? He was Ulysses S. Grant (1822-85) who later became the 18th President of the U.S. To teach how essential humility is to the Christian life, St. Augustine said, “... the first part is humility; the second, humility; the third, humility.” Let us remember again that God can use us in his great work when we humble ourselves and obey his word.

Paul also said that he served the Lord with tears, in the midst of severe trials. He didn't cry because things were hard for him to endure. Rather, his tears were for the people under his care. He shed tears for his Jewish brothers in Ephesus who rejected the gospel of salvation and became abusive. He shed tears for the church leaders who were divided because of their infighting. Have you shed your tears for the people who cause deep pain and trouble for you? This is not easy, because bad feelings against them arise in our hearts. But Paul really cared for them and cried out to the Lord to help them. He was humble in this way. May we learn from Paul so that we may serve the Lord with great humility and with tears!

Second, a message of repentance and faith. Look at verse 21. *"I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."* Being humble does not mean Paul preached the messages that were always soothing to the listeners. He boldly declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. His message was simple and to the point: Repent and believe in Jesus. It was a message of salvation. How can we receive the grace of salvation? First, we must admit that we sinned against God. We are doomed to eternal condemnation. We must turn to God in repentance, saying, "Father, I have sinned before you. Have mercy on me and forgive me." Next, we must have faith in the Lord Jesus. In Philippi, the jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (Ac 16:30). When a sinner accepts the gospel in his heart, God forgives his sins and gives him eternal life. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Ro 1:16). Paul proclaimed this message boldly in Ephesus.

Third, compelled by the Spirit. Look at verses 22-23. *"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me."* Paul was compelled by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem. The mission to bridge the gap between the Gentiles and Jews was very important for the church. At the same time, Paul knew that it would be a dangerous mission. The Holy Spirit warned him that prison and hardships were waiting for him. Given the warning, he could have said, "Okay, God does not want me to go there. That's why the Spirit gives me this warning." In our selfish nature, we tend to interpret signs of God for our own desires and benefits. But Paul was different. Look at 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."* Paul's passion was to complete the mission that God had given him. It was to testify to the good news of God's grace. For this purpose, he would run toward the finish line, as a marathon runner would. We learn that God's mission gives us a clear purpose and meaning in life. Sadly, many people have no purpose or goal in life. They just follow the trend of this world like lemmings or wherever their desires take them. Paul had a clear goal based on God's mission for him. He gave not only his time and his heart to this mission, but he was willing to give his life. He told the Ephesians leaders in verses 25-27. *"Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me"*

again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.” Applying God’s word given to his servant Ezekiel (Eze 33:8), Paul reminded them that he had given his best to plant the hope of the kingdom of God in them.

Fourth, “Be shepherds of the church of God.” Let us read together 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.”* In Ephesus, Paul was a great preacher and a Bible teacher. He was a disciple maker. Most of all, he was a shepherd. Now he charged the elders to be shepherds of the church of God. So what does it mean to be a shepherd for God’s flock? First of all, a shepherd must keep watch over himself. A shepherd is different from a cowboy. A good shepherd must lead the way for his sheep, not drive them from behind with a whip. He must set a good example for his sheep. He must not say, “Do as I tell you, not as I do.” A shepherd must keep watch over himself through daily repentance before the word of God and prayer. Billy Graham did not want to give a chance to the devil to tempt him with woman and money. So he decided that he would never get into a car with a female unless there was a third person present. He also set up a board of trustees to take care of the finance of his evangelistic association. He became a good role model for other evangelists by watching himself first.

Most of all, a shepherd must keep watch over the flock of sheep. A shepherd must watch over the sheep to make sure they do not stray from the green pastures and to protect them from predators. A shepherd must be vigilant in prayer and make a good spiritual environment for the sheep. Paul said, *“Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”* There is one Chief Shepherd of God’s church. He is Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11). Jesus died on the cross to save us from sin and death. Jesus purchased each member of the church of God with his blood. The church belongs to Christ. He charges his servants to be shepherds of his church. A good shepherd is one who follows the example of Jesus and Paul. We cannot say everything about being a good shepherd here. But one characteristic is most important to remember. A shepherd must sacrifice for the sheep. Ultimately, a shepherd must give his life for the sheep. Only a sacrificial person who loves Jesus more than himself can really be a shepherd of God’s sheep. Paul was a good example. Look at verse 31. *“So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”* Paul kept watch over God’s people in Ephesus night and day for three years. He served God’s flock with tears.

Look at 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.”* Paul charged the Ephesian elders to be shepherds for the church of God. He did so with earnest prayer. Ultimately, however, Paul knew that only God could help them to be shepherds of God’s flock. So he put his trust in God and committed the elders into God’s hand. He knew that the word of God planted in their hearts would grow and produce fruit by the sovereign hand of God. Hardships and trials would beset them. Savage

wolves would come and attack the flock. But Paul believed that God would work among them to build them up through his word of grace. God would use their sufferings to sanctify them. We should learn from Paul. In his grace, God uses us to help young people to accept Jesus as their personal Savior and grow to be spiritual leaders. But ultimately, it is not us who can build them up. It is God and the word of God. We are only his instruments. So we should learn to commit them to God and to the word of his grace.

Paul was a tent-maker missionary. He worked hard to supply his own needs and the needs of his companions. Whenever possible, he tried very hard not to be a burden to others. He strived to be a blessing, helping the weak. He told the elders to remember the words of the Lord Jesus himself who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (35). Paul's relationship with the elders is a beautiful example of Christian fellowship. He had cared for them and loved them. They responded with love and care for him. And now they were sad because of his leaving. After his farewell address, Paul knelt down with the Ephesian elders and prayed. He depended on God in prayer. Look at verses 37-38. *"They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship."* What a beautiful scene with full of love between a shepherd and his flock.

In conclusion, may God help us to be shepherds of the church of God like Paul! Let us read 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."*