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Acts 20:22-28 "Ephesian Elders Meeting" (Part 2 of 3) November 14, 2018

Let's open our Bibles tonight to the book of Acts 20:22 as we continue our study verse by verse and chapter by chapter through this chronicle of the early church.

There are three missionary journeys of Paul that really take the gospel to the ends of the world, if you will, to the ends of the earth during Paul's administration. They are covered in chapter 13:5 through chapter 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ or so, in there, and there are three trips. The first one Paul took to Galatia (modern-day Turkey), and there are plenty of churches that were planted there. You can read about most of them in the book of Revelation as well. The second trip was mostly to Europe and the third trip mostly to Ephesus. Although Paul did visit all of the other churches, he spent three years planting the church in Ephesus, and that's where we have the letter to the Ephesians; we also have chapter 19 and much of chapter 20, here, dedicated to that church.

We are currently in chapter 20 with Paul's third missionary journey. He is on his way - not home up in Antioch in Syria but back to Jerusalem. He really is led, or he feels led, of the Lord to make it back there for Pentecost. We can talk a little bit about why he's in such a hurry to get there. We spent three weeks in chapter 19, if you were with us, looking at Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus, where God did great things; I mean, a totally heathen town with lots of witchcraft and all, idolatry, demons and idolatry everywhere, and the Lord just began to work. People began to burn their incantation books. Idol makers went broke. I mean, it was a real revival. In fact, chapter 19 ends with a riot in town led by some businessmen who were losing their shirts in the industry because so many people were getting saved. And so Paul sensed, at that time, it was time to move on. I thought that was a good call. They were crying for his head. Paul had sent a couple of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, ahead of him back up to the Greece area, on your map there. And they were collecting money from Gentile churches that would send representatives with the offerings to Jerusalem to help the poor saints there who were struggling to get by. Paul hoped that that would bridge the gap between himself and the Gentile churches with the Jewish believers in Jerusalem who had a little harder time grasping onto the grace of God in terms of the Gentiles. So in chapter 20 (the first six verses or so), we are given Paul's travels; and it was a lot of travels - 150 miles up the coast to Troas, another 150 miles over to Macedonia,

down the coast to Athens and Greece, 300 more miles. He wanted to get on a regular boat that departed for the Jerusalem area for worshippers, travelers. He uncovered a plot that they had planned to throw him overboard (he did make some enemies along the way), and so, rather than getting on the boat, he just doubled back, and he went 600 miles the other direction. Lots of travel. Paul stayed three months down in the Corinth area before he turned around. But then he finally got to (and you can find it on the map) Miletus, there on the Asian Continent, if you will, down below Ephesus. And Paul would stop there one more time, I think, to minister to and to just bless and to have some final words with the leadership that he trained for three years that were now pastoring this church where Paul spent more time than anywhere else. So, he hits the port city of Miletus; it's about 12 miles down the Neander River (which is still there in Turkey today), and these men came - these elders came - to hear from Paul.

So, when you get to verse 17 and we go to the end of the chapter, the Holy Spirit gives to us (Luke records for us) Paul's word with these spiritual leaders. It's important because it is the only sermon in the book of Acts that Paul gave to believers. It was expressly speaking to leaders, to pastors, to overseers, to elders. And it gives us a real good, I think, insight into Paul's idea of what church should be all about, what the responsibilities of those overseers in church ministry should be. And so we began last week, and we decided we're going to spend three weeks just looking at this sermon. It's all of eighteen verses. Not very long but we treasure what the Lord had to say. And think about this. Paul's down the road fifteen or twenty years from when he started. He has traveled 1600 square miles. His best friend is a doctor and probably, because he never stopped moving, he got regular B12 shots or something. But you can understand he'd have a doctor as his best buddy. I mean, he just poured himself out. And so these are guys that he loved, that he watched the Lord raise up, that he trained, that he spent day and night with, that he wanted to just pour himself into and pray for and has devoted himself to; and it's to these guys that he leaves this very thriving, large, influential church right in the middle of the trade routes. So Paul was sure he wasn't going to see them again (we'll read that again tonight). That makes his words, I think, even more meaningful to us. But it's all about pastoral priorities and lifestyle, and it's good for all of us.

So this is what we read of him saying last week. Verse 18 said this, "And when they had come to him, he said to them: 'You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility,

with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.' " So last week, Paul was all about, "You know me. You know my example, my methods, my life, my sacrifice." And Paul called on them to remember what they had seen in him. "Do what I do. Follow my example." That's a pretty good way to teach - if you can call people to be like you. Most of the time my dad would say, "Don't do it like I do it. Better yourself." And I thought, "Well, that's not helpful." But that's, a lot of times, the way we think we can teach.

Tonight we'd like to start in verse 22, and we're going to head down through verse 28. And Lord be willing, we'll finish it off next time. Verse 22 Paul goes on, and he says, " 'And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.' " So Paul calls on them to remember his way of life with them for these three years and then says to them, "You know where I'm heading, and every place I've passed through" (and there're hundreds of miles here) "on the way, I've run into people warning me that I shouldn't go." The amazing question to me when I read this is - was this the Lord telling Paul not to go, or was it the Lord telling Paul to go? Everyone that he ran into, prophets alike, all said, "Bad idea." Friends and neighboring towns we will read of begged him to turn around. "This is far enough." Did God want Paul to be in Jerusalem at this time? Or was this simply the heart of Paul wanting to just go and help? Paul said he felt "bound in the spirit" to go. So what do you think? Paul's concern was more than a fearful uneasiness. You might get a fearful uneasiness if you're not a good flyer. You're pretty sure you'll land on the other side, but you don't like the experience. This wasn't like that at all. Paul got warnings from everyone. In fact, in chapter 21 (when we get that far along), in Caesarea (which is just a couple of hours outside of Jerusalem - to walk) there's a fellow named Agabus, a prophet (we've run into him a couple of times) who shows up at Philip's house while Paul is resting there. And he actually ties his own hands with Paul's belt and says, "This is what they're gonna do to the guy who owns this belt." And then everyone went, "Well, that's it. We can't go. Now we've got prophets being sent to you." And the people there pleaded with Paul not to go; in fact, you can read it in chapter 21:8, "On the next day we who were Paul's companions

departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit, "So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles."' Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, 'What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' " So here's the conflict - here're prophets and elders and lovers of God all being led, they say, by the Holy Spirit to say, "Don't go." And here's Paul, feeling very much led by the Holy Spirit to go. So what do you do with that? And how do you come to this understanding, if you will? Paul, when he wrote here in verse 24 what we record of him saying, "I don't count my life dear to me, or any of these warnings." Look, at some point in these kinds of conflicts, you just have to stand back and let the Lord speak to the individual. Right? You can't take sides. I can't read this and say Paul was wrong or Paul was right. I mean, if you look ahead it seems like God really wanted Paul there. It could be that the Lord wanted to just warn Paul that there was trouble ahead. These were not going to be easy waters. When the Lord called Paul, He told him very clearly, right at the outset, the things he was going to have to suffer as a messenger of the gospel to the Gentiles. This was not going to be an easy road. And he signed on, on that day. And to this day, up to this point - fifteen, sixteen years later - he's still goin' strong. That hasn't been an issue. I don't know how to come down on the side of who's right here. I just know that the people who loved him said, "That's a bad idea," and Paul, who loved the Lord, said, "I think it's a good idea," and Paul went forward, and he followed. I am sure that, as you read the Scriptures, one of Paul's motivations was that he had left a lot of orphans and widows in Jerusalem over the years. I mean, he had caused havoc in the church, and I'm sure that he always had the desire to try to make some reparations and maybe relieve some of the pressure of the people that were suffering. He had brought all of this money and all of these Gentile fellowships' representatives hundreds of miles to try to mend some fences. So I'm sure in Paul's heart this was a gesture of making things better, if you will. Paul had gone all of these years in ministry, and he believed that this was God's will for his life. Everyone around him, prophets included, thought it was a bad idea. Everyone claims the Holy Spirit. "The Holy Spirit says.....the Holy Spirit said this." "I'm bound in the spirit." Everybody's giving credit to God. So over the years I think I've learned when you

hear both people saying, "The Lord told me," "Well, no, the Lord told me," and people go, "Who do you think the Lord told?" I don't know. I'm having a hard time hearing the Lord for me. That's all I need to know. But I admire when you are led by the Spirit and you just be faithful to the Lord, and there's no extenuating circumstances here. We can't point to something that's sinful or wrong or obviously a belief that's held in error. So we just have to let people have their way. "Then you go ahead." In fact, you will read in a couple of weeks that when Paul said, "Look, I'm gonna go, and we're not gonna stay, and we just believe God's gonna move, and I'm just gonna go with Him," it says, "Then we just started praying for him and left him alone." I mean, at some point even the church went, "All right. If that's what you believe God wants you to do, then that's the way that you should go after it."

And so whether it was the Holy Spirit or just Paul's own spirit stirring him, I can't tell you. The Bible would give the credibility and the responsibility to the Holy Spirit's work in both of their lives. And if that's the case, then I guess I have to leave it at that and not do much more with that. I do know that if I read ahead (and it's always good to cheat - read ahead), despite the cost that Paul was facing, the Lord would use Paul and protect Paul and guide Paul and direct Paul and that Paul was willing to pay the price. But that's only my opinion. I think he did the right thing, personally, because living a Christian life isn't easy, isn't it? I mean, it's pretty easy to get advice. Just ask someone. Or get a Facebook account and put up your opinion; you'll find out what people think of you. You know? But it isn't so easy to live the Christian life. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good" (Matthew 5:44-45). That's not an easy way to live. And yet that's the work of God's Spirit. So though the trials are true, and you read about them here, I think God has great purposes in them. And my personal opinion is (not that that should matter much to you what I think) I think that the Lord had a purpose for this, and He was warning Paul to be ready what he was going to face, and Paul was willing. He found a willing heart. When Paul wrote to the Romans about his ministry, he described it (in chapter 8:36-37 of Romans) by saying, " 'For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." Paul really saw his ministry as being a sacrificial one, his life as belonging to Someone else. And he didn't quit along the road. Right? He was all in. And I think so should we be all in. Paul didn't interpret

these warnings. You don't read anywhere in here where he says to his friends, or writes to them later, "Oh, man, I should've listened to the Lord. I wish old Agabus would have said it one more time. I wouldn't have gone." It never occurred to Paul that this was a direction being given from the Lord. In fact, in the Roman letter (in chapter 15:25-33 of Romans), Paul, at the end of that chapter, says to the Romans, "Hey, I'm going up to Jerusalem, and I'm bringing offerings from the Gentiles. And I'm praying, and would you pray with me that this offering that I'm bringing would be acceptable to the saints so that, by the will of God, when I'm done there, I can be refreshed and come to see you?" That was in his mind. He didn't think that stopping in Jerusalem would end his travels. He was just hoping it would succeed so that he could move through and move on to Rome where he had not really been. So, that's Paul's mindset.

So the warnings did not move him. We read that here. "None of these things move me." It didn't change his mind. It didn't change his purposes. It didn't change his intentions. And I think if you know the Lord is leading you somewhere when Debbie and I came out this way and believed that the Lord wanted to start a church, and that He'd have us to begin to look at how that could work, there was no one in our life, in our family, in our friendship circle, in our ministry friendships that thought it was a good idea. Nobody. They all went, "That's a bad idea." Everyone. But we thought it was a really good idea. And so if you believe God has spoken to you, then you just move down that road. You don't turn away. You can't be turned, if you will. Paul's greatest concern, according to verse 24, was not to save his own neck, if that was the case; he just wanted to be sure he finished running his race with joy. He wanted to be sure that whatever God had for him, he was going to finish it with a smile on his face, doing what the Lord wanted him to do. And I love his description of his job. "My job is to tell people about the good news of God's grace." That's really a positive outlook, isn't it? "This is what God called me to do." I think Paul had a very different view of dying than most of us. He believed.....dying to him was a win-win situation. "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." That's what he says (Philippians 1:21). "Either way, I win." There's no heads you lose, tails you win. He's just going to win. "I'll win living, I'll win dying. Whatever the Lord wants, I'm excited for that." And Paul was just that.

You might remember (in the book of Acts here), when Paul was outside of Lystra, that he was stoned by the people when he didn't respond to their desire to worship them as gods. They left him outside Lystra for dead. Paul, when he wrote back to

the Corinthians later, said it had been fourteen years ago when he wrote the letter that that had happened, and he said, "I don't know if I was in or out of my body, but I do know this. I was caught up into the third heaven, and I saw things that it would be a sin for me to try to write out for you what I saw. And so I was up in Paradise, and I heard unspeakable words which is unlawful for me to utter" (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Paul got a view of heaven. God gave him a thorn in the flesh, or He allowed him to have that from the enemy, so that he wouldn't be exalted above his place because of what he saw. But I think that it changed Paul's view. "You can kill me. That's fine. If I'm gonna die doing the Lord's will, that's fine. Because I know where I'm headed. I've seen where it is." But Paul just figured, "In the meantime, I'm running a race, and God has set a course for me to run." That's true of all of us. Right? You're running a race. I can't run your race. You probably can't run mine. All the races are long; some seem to be longer. If you run your race faithfully, you'll probably complain a lot about how come yours is really crooked and uphill all the time, and how come that guy just gets to roll downhill all the time? But God has a plan, and our goal in life is to finish the race. Right? Paul, when he gets to the 2 Timothy letter, was able to say to his young protégé, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). "And now I'm gonna get a reward." Paul wanted to finish well. Don't you want to finish well? I mean, just run across the line; not be dragged across by your friends. "Oh, come on, brother." (Laughing) "Okay." No. You want to be running. Right? Paul, when he wrote to the Hebrews (in chapter 12:1-3), said, "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls." Paul said, "Run the race." Right? There're a lot of people that have given their lives over the last 100 years, 400 years, 1000 years so that you and I can run the race. This is our generation; we're responsible for this generation. We get to run the race now. And that race, to Paul, wasn't finished until the Lord said he was finished.

Here's my question for you. If someone asked you to rate your running the race, how well are you doing running - spiritually? I know that most new believers - you go to a new believers class here, those guys are runnin'. They've got markers and a Bible this big, and they want to underline everything. And they....."Say that again.

Where's that verse? Oh, that's a good verse....." They want to do everything. And then you find the five-year-old Christian who's no longer running. He's takin' a bath, now, in the Gatorade deal. He's not goin' anywhere. He used to run, but he don't run no more. He don't show up to pray no more, he doesn't show up to serve anymore, he barely shows up for church anymore. He was really excited. He had a Bible this big with a cover and a name, and he had bumper stickers and witness shirts. Yeah, those things have all worked out now. "We've done everything we could. I didn't know it was going to be like a 100-year deal." No. You had to run to win. (Laughing) This is not a sprint; it's not a 100-yard dash. You gotta run the marathon.

Paul said, "I just want to finish." He's been at it a long time. This guy's been on the road for a decade and a half and not just staying in the nice hotels; he was gettin' beat up and chased down and accused and jailed and punished within inches of his life. And he goes, "I just want to run." I'm thinkin' this guy got beat up. I can't imagine he could even run anymore! But so often we tend to start off pretty fast, and yet we don't seem to run to win. And Paul makes that big point. You run, but if you run in a race, you run to win. Who's going to run for 10th place? I tried to do half a marathon one time. You wouldn't believe it, but I did. (Laughing) And here was my mindset. "I just want to finish." I didn't. (Laughing) Because that's not enough motivation. "I just want to finish" got me to In-N-Out. About four miles in, I went, "Oh, that looks good." (Laughing) "I'll just wait right here. Who cares?" I wanted to get my "I ran" t-shirt before I took off because I knew I wasn't going to get it at the finish line. You gotta run to win. I told this story before, but we used to....we had....well, we still have lots of sports teams here that play different sports and all....but we used to play a lot, and I hated losing. And we played softball - 9:00 games in the winter, and it's just cold. But we hated to lose. Sometimes my wife.....she'd go to every game except if it was 9:00 on a Monday, and it was 50 degrees, and she wanted to stay home. So I'd come home, and she'd go, "How was it?" I'd go, "Oh, we lost." Then she'd say this, "Did you at least have fun?" And I said, "I thought I told you we lost!" (Laughing) "There's no fun losing! How can you have fun? You lost! You stunk!" It's like getting a silver medal if you're in training all those years. I don't want one of those. Either win or let me go home! Paul said, "Run to win. Run to win." You and I should be running to win. Paul saw Jerusalem - everyone saw it as his death knell.... "Maybe that's the finish line, but I'm gonna run to win. I'll be a smilin' guy runnin' for the finish line to get done." There's a glorious future that awaits you at the finish line. You're gonna get there, and one day the Lord is gonna meet you there at the gate, and you're gonna hear

(Matthew 25:23), "Well done, good and faithful servant; you've been faithful over a few things, I'll make you ruler over many. Enter into the joy of the Lord." That's the finish line you want to hit. You don't want to limp in or fall over the finish line or get dragged there or just stop at In-N-Out somewhere along your spiritual way. Not good for you.

So, look, to the Lord, Paul was a servant. To the people, Paul was a wonderful teacher and friend and example. But Paul, to himself, was a sacrifice. "I'm a vessel that God can pour out." And I think, unfortunately, it is oftentimes - at least in our culture - the lack of a real sacrifice that defines Western Christianity. You know the churches that do the best in America Christian-wise are ones that tell you, "You'll always be healthy, you'll always be wealthy, you can have what you want, you can fulfill your own purposes." It's all about self and leisure time and vacation money and room additions and entertainment and selfish needs. Nobody's runnin' to win. They just need God when they need a little blessing. Like a genie. God is their genie. "Hey, bless me, Man. Thank You, God. In Jesus' name." Paul just wanted to run to win, and Paul is running into the midst of a storm. Right? Into the midst of the storm. Why did Paul do that? I think that, if you read all that he wrote, he would tell you that the price that Jesus paid for him made him obligated to do just that. Right? In other words, he was so indebted to the Lord that he wanted to count the cost, pick up the cross and run. Paul's all about being indebted with gratefulness and joy. So, look, let's put ourselves in Paul's shoes because that's a good way to learn the Bible. You could stop in Ephesus, build a house and stay. Everyone loves you. It's hundreds of miles away from problems. He's entrenched here. People will love him here. He could avoid the prison, the trial, the judgment, the ultimate beheading. He can miss all of that stuff. He can just stay in Ephesus. And he could have been secure, and he could have been safe. But that would mean living for himself and not for the Lord, and he was a bond slave. "God saved me. I belong to Him. I can't stay here." "Don't go, Paul! We're gonna miss you!" "Yeah, whatever happens, I'm goin'." "You might die!" "Okay. Wherever the finish line is." That's the kind of guy you can't stop. Right? If the church is filled with men and women like this, it can't be stopped. Paul was called in the spirit to Jerusalem, and that's where he was going to go. And I love to see guys in the Bible that have this kind of commitment. There are far too few of them, but Paul's primary interest - in fact, the interest in his life - is that he just wants to finish what God began. And that drove him.

He says, in verse 25, " 'And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.' " "I haven't held back giving to you all of God's counsel." Now, from a biblical standpoint, it would be ten more years before Paul would be killed by Nero. Much of that time was spent in prison. He did get out, and was declared innocent on that first trial, for maybe eighteen months. We don't know where Paul went. There are some indications in secular history where he might have gone. There's no sense telling you that because I don't know if it's biblically correct. But he did get out for a while, and then he was re-picked up, and then he wasn't let go the second time; he was beheaded in prison there in Rome. So here's Paul's heart, heading for Jerusalem, "It seems to me I'm not gonna make it out of here alive. I'm certainly never going to be able to come this far back here and spend time with you. And so, if that's the case" (as Paul saw it and they saw it) he adds, there in verse 25, "because I'm not going to be able to come back and be in fellowship with you as I used to be, preaching among you God's kingdom, therefore I want you to know and remember from this day that I'm innocent of everyone's blood because I haven't failed to declare to you all of God's counsel." Paul could go the grave, if necessary, with a peaceful heart. And his reason was fairly simple, "I have not hidden from you the very things that God wanted you to know." He had preached the kingdom of God amongst his friends and fellow laborers, but now he wants them to mark down that they remembered everything he said. And he uses these words, "the whole counsel of God." In other words, "I taught you everything that you need to learn."

Now, the New Testament wasn't printed, for the most part; there were letters floatin' around. The Old Testament was available. Paul just gave it all to them. Right? People go, "Do we need to know the Old Testament anymore?" Well, it's in here. I guess we need it. "Well, it just seems it's old." Yeah, it doesn't mean it's not good, and it certainly helps us to understand the New Testament. God has given us His Word. Maybe Paul had in mind that prophecy (there from the Ezekiel passage in chapter 3:17-19) where the LORD, in speaking through Ezekiel to the nation, said, "Look, I've made you a watchman over the children of Israel," He said to Ezekiel. "And I want them to hear My Word at your mouth. I want you to warn them for Me. If the wicked are warned, and they turn away, their blood is on their own heads. But if you don't warn the wicked, then I will hold you responsible for their judgment." Those are pretty strong words. It's not a good memory verse. Because it kind of lays the burden on you. But, "If you warn the wicked, and he

doesn't turn from his wickedness, then he dies in his own iniquity, and you've delivered your own soul. But if you don't warn him, then I'm going to hold you responsible." Think about that the next time you're sittin' somewhere with your friends, and you haven't told them about Jesus or about hell or about judgment. And you're fine. You're goin' to heaven. You couldn't be happier. And they don't know, or they won't listen. And you haven't told them. Once you tell them, then it's on them. But we have this responsibility. And Paul saw it as a grave responsibility, to be up front with the people about God's Word. He told the Romans (1:14) he was a debtor to all men in that regard. He told the Corinthians (in 1 Corinthians 9:16), "Woe is me if I don't preach the gospel! Necessity has been laid upon me to preach." Paul felt this burden that he couldn't keep it to himself. Look, if you had the cure for cancer and you didn't tell anybody, and around you people were dying in the hospital, but you knew, you said nothing, that's a pretty culpable place to be. Well, you know the way of eternal life, and the people that don't know it are not going to hear about it unless you tell them. And Paul was able to say, leaving a place after three years, "I've never hidden a thing of God's Word. I've told everyone what God has shown me. I haven't failed them, I haven't shunned the Scriptures, I haven't set things apart, I haven't selectively taught. I've declared the whole counsel of God's Word. I'm innocent of their blood," literally of their life. "I'm off the hook." Right? Driven by the understanding that there is a responsibility that comes with knowledge, Paul just couldn't sit back and enjoy eternal life and forgiveness of sin while people around him - unaware of it - were heading for hell in a hand basket. It drove Paul. But he says that to these elders, "I want you to be like this now." What a statement Paul makes. I don't know if that moves you. But let me ask you - does your family know of your faith in Christ? Does your neighbor? Have you told your neighbors? Have you worked it into your conversation at your job? Do your co-workers know? Or are you just like the guy in hiding? Will you be responsible for them or not? It's heavy duty. I get it. But I just want you to see Paul's heart. Paul's goin' to his death, he thinks. And he looks over his life and says, "I've done the right thing. I've gotten that word out there. I haven't put it off. I've risked everything." The good, the bad, the ugly, that which was blessed, that which seemed offensive to people, that which was well-received, which no one would receive. I guarantee you - if you start sharing the Bible in our world, you're gonna get a lot of people turn against you. But Paul wanted to be sure that the leaders in this church, when he left, would do the same thing. In other words, that the witness in Ephesus was going to continue without interruption.

In fact, this is what he says in verse 28, " 'Therefore' " (because of this - wherever there's a therefore, there's a wherefore) " 'take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.' " Awesome verse. Great call, I think, and challenge to these men in ministry. But I want you to notice a couple of things. Number one - there is that hint, again, of the trinity. Right? The Holy Spirit made you an overseer. It is God's church. God purchased that church with His own blood. God's own blood. Jesus and God and the Spirit listed together in that one verse. But here's his counsel to these men. "Because my life is now going to be over, as far as we know - as far as what's waiting for me, because I have been faithful to tell every man God's whole counsel, therefore this is what I want you to do now that I'm leaving." And he starts with this, "Take care of yourself. Take heed to yourself." "*Prosecho*" means pay close attention to you. If there's any place in the Bible where selfishness is approved, it's here. Take care of you first. You want to be good at anything you do spiritually, make sure spiritually you're in the right place. Take care of you. You first. Right? You pay close attention to your own fellowship with God. Because ministry - true ministry - is always (in the Bible) an overflow of what your life has, personally. In other words, it's not like business where you can learn a craft or go to school and get a degree. Ministry is an overflow of your relationship with God. The closer you are to the Lord - the more you take in, the more you receive, the more obedient you are - it exudes out of your life. So guys like Moses - you watch him for forty years when people are goin' nuts around him - stays the course. Guys like Joshua - he just can't move out of that place because he's locked in. So Paul says to these guys, "You want to do well in the years to come as the church pastors, take heed to yourself." First and foremost, the best preparation is not a seminar, is not some school class, not a seminary; it is your relationship with God. Nurture that. Do that first. Take care of that. More than anything else. If you want to prepare yourself for ministry, if you want to endure what you're going to face, if you want to persevere in faith, then your relationship with the Lord needs to be strong and sure. Be selfish in your personal devotions. When we have people that are involved in church here, we tell them, "We'd like to get you to church twice a week." They can't always do it, and we try to work with them. But we do that for their benefit. It's not like the rules, like if you pass, you get a check mark. You know? But if you're not taking in, you can't give it out. If you're not growin', you're no use to anyone. We don't need another usher standing at the door, looking out the window. We need ushers that love God and love His people. But in order to get those people, we're going to have to have them in a relationship with God. And if they're

in a relationship with the Lord, then they'll do fine. We don't need another guitar player - unless the guitar player is singin' to Jesus because his heart is there. And that's what matters. And then God can bless him, and we get blessed. It isn't his talent; it's his devotion. The talent's secondary to the devotion. It has to be the relationship that you have with God, personally. So spend time with the Lord. You want to get ready for anything God's called you to, get your relationship with God

walkin' with God, you'll be here. I don't need to tell you to go start prayin' because you're prayin'. You're in a relationship with the Lord. I don't need to tell you to read your Bible. You're gonna get the Bible - you can't wait to get it out! Like that new believer. "Oh, I read 27 chapters!!!!" You know, they get great. You go to a new believer class, they'll tell you they read 300 pages. I go, "What did you read?" They go, "I don't know, man, but it's great!" (Laughing) They're just hungry. They're just hungry. They'll eat anything, and.....you gotta watch over them because they'll eat anything; even the false doctrine that follows along.

Abraham so loved the LORD that, when he was wandering in the place of promise, every place he stopped (and I think I mentioned it Sunday), he built an altar of worship. Because he worshipped God, God blessed Abraham. He gave him lots of sheep, which meant he had to dig lots of wells to provide them water. When his son, Isaac, came along, he looked at his dad's life, and he assumed that Abraham was successful because he dug wells. So you'll find Isaac digging a ton of wells but not very many altars. In fact, the two wells that he dug that had the greatest influence, if you will, were named Sitnah and Esek. It means strife and contention. That's where Isaac ended up. He looked at his dad, didn't see that relationship with the LORD, so he tried to follow his outward activity, if you will. Then Jacob comes along. He doesn't build an altar or dig a well. He believed that flocks could be grown through genetic engineering, which he was really good at (in Genesis 30). Fortunately, God would retrieve his heart in a wrestling match one night (that's what they were gambling for), and the heel catcher became a man that was governed by God.

But that's often how ministries fall apart. People fall in love with the Lord, they want to serve, they get excited about what God is doing, and then they stop maintaining their relationship with the Lord. They get too busy for God to spend time with God. They're the Marthas in the kitchen, never the Mary sitting at His feet. And so they burn out, and they get tired, and they complain. They usually turn on people, "Well, if you don't care, I don't care. I work my butt off, and you

don't even show up! Rah rah rah." You get that a lot. If you love the Lord it doesn't matter to me what you do or don't do. I mean I want you to do well, but what you do or don't do has nothing to do with my relationship with the Lord because that's going to stay no matter what you do. That's my conviction. Right? So I can't be turned off by you not showing up or you not being faithful or you being angry or saying the wrong thing. It doesn't matter because I've got to stay right where God and I have a relationship. So if you have that part right, I think everything else will be fine in your life.

But look at the Ephesian church - this church - who Jesus has to write to fifty years down the road. And what He says to them is, "You're really busy, and you're really big, but you've left your first love" (Revelation 2:2-4). That was His only complaint. In other words, "The reason that you're doing what you used to do, and what you're still doing, the motivation has changed. It used to be a love for Me. Now it's just the machine has to be greased and has to be maintained and watched over." We're all still really busy, but we don't really care why we're doing it now. So, wrong motivations and purposes can replace overflow in my life, which is why Paul says to these guys, "Look, keep yourself together." Timothy was maybe forty years old when Paul would send him back to pastor this church; young guy but real young for the pastor at that time. But when Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy (and Timothy was not a Type A guy, he was kind of a Type B guy, and Paul was forever going, "Come on, stir up the gift that is in you, and I've prayed for you, and stick up for these guys and talk to these guys"), he says in chapter 4:16, "Take heed to yourself. Be sure that you're doing well. Take heed to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in so doing you will both save yourself and those who hear you." So, "Timothy, you want to be effective there, you stay close to the Lord. Be sure you know what you believe and why, and then, as you walk in that life, not only will you be saved but others will get saved watching you." It's that overflow that matters. When he wrote his second letter to Timothy (several years later), Paul said to him (2 Timothy 2:20-22), "Timothy, in a grand house there are vessels of gold and of silver, but there are also vessels of earth and of wood; some are honorable and some are dishonorable. If you will purge yourself from these things" (he had made a whole list of sinful ways), "then you can be a vessel that is honorable and is set apart for God's use and prepared for every good work. So, Timothy, stay away from youthful lusts; follow after righteousness and peace and joy and love with all those who call upon God from a pure heart." His counsel to a pastor was, "Keep yourself close to the Lord. It's all about your relationship with God." And I would say that that's true today, too. You'll serve best when you're

doing it out of a loving relationship with God. God, speaking through Paul, says to these men (for the last time), "Take heed to yourself. You watch over yourself."

And then, "over the flock." Right? First in your life; then to the lives of others. Here's how the old saying came out of ministry school at Costa Mesa - God works in you and then through you. If God doesn't work in you, He can't work through you. He's gotta do a work in you first. He's gotta prepare the vessel, and then He can walk through you, and then you're not gonna get stumbled or turned. And I think every usher and counselor and Sunday school teacher and worship leader, every pastor - nothing happens in ministry because nothing's happening in the leader's life. But if the leader is close to the Lord, life is found in the ministries that they oversee. I like the fact in the verse here that the Lord calls it "the flock." Watch over "the flock." Isn't it nice to be part of God's flock? We've talked, I think, on Sunday mornings before, and maybe you've been here when we did, but sheep are stupid. They're not just dumb or a little misguided; they're just plain ignorant. They are some of the dumbest animals on the planet. So, they can't care for themselves and groom themselves and protect themselves. If you get around the corner from a sheep, he'll freak out because he can't see you. In his mind, he doesn't know, "Oh, he's just around the corner." No, no. You could, "Hey, I'm over here." He don't care. He don't see you, he'll just drop dead. "There's water over there." He won't cross over to go get it; he'll just die in the dirt. Dumb animal. The Lord calls us His "flock." (Laughing) And I get it. "Know that the LORD, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture" (Psalm 100:3). Jesus is our great Shepherd. That's awesome! To the pastors, Paul said, "You guys are the under shepherds. He's the great Shepherd. At best, you're the under shepherd, and you've been made overseers, '*presbuteros*,' by the Holy Spirit. You have been given a leadership position, an oversight position. The Lord has raised you up." And I like that, "The Lord has given you this responsibility." You know how you get to be a pastor today, in many places? You get to school, you get a diploma, you know the right people, there's church politics, there's voting, there're candidating committees. A lot of it is very political. We don't do that here. But oftentimes what you end up with is the will of man and the plans of man and the choices of man and a very weak church where a guy's just good at politics, so he gets to the front. You know? And when he teaches, he does it to please the voting committee, not the Lord. When he ministers, he does it to make sure his job is secure and his retirement will still be in place. He doesn't do it to please the Lord. That wasn't the way it was happening in the church here; it shouldn't be the way it happens in the church now. We

should let the Holy Spirit raise up people that He wants to use because He's the only One that can prepare you for the ministry. Paul wrote to the Galatians (3:3), he said, "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" When Paul wrote to Timothy (the pastor of Ephesus) again, he said this, "If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work" (1 Timothy 3:1). "If he really wants to be an overseer, that's a great desire." If that's in his heart, it's a personal calling and a desire that comes from the Lord. I've said it before, but I'll tell you - you can't teach desire. You can help people to achieve what they desire once that desire's in place; you can't teach desire. If someone says, "I want to be a pastor, I'm gonna learn, I'm gonna make myself available," that's something only God can do. It's not a career choice. There's not enough money in it unless you're a crook. There's not enough glory in it; people think you're an idiot, and they'll tell you to your face or they'll write you letters without signing their name. (Laughing) There're many ways to be told. There's no benefit to it unless it is a calling that you enjoy, that God has called you to. And you go do it because the Lord is the One that has called you. The Lord even goes so far (in James' letter there) to discourage those who would step into that position without seeking that calling, saying that they receive a greater condemnation (James 3:1). And the reason is, look, I'm shootin' my mouth off to all of you for an hour. That's just today. I've been doin' this for almost forty years - shootin' my mouth off for an hour. If I'm way off, there's got to be a pretty good.....I'm in big trouble. I can be foolish, I can be wrong, but I should try to do that which God has given me to do. Say the things God says, don't say things He doesn't say, and make sure that He's honored and you're blessed. Because this is too scary otherwise. Right? You don't want to mislead people or drive them astray or stumble them. But the Bible says, "My sheep hear My voice. I know them, they follow Me" (John 10:27). And if we can get you to listen to what Jesus has to say, and you follow the Lord, then I'll be fine and you'll be fine. So you wait for God to call you, and if He calls you, then it's recognized over time. That's all it is.

Notice that Paul says here, "Take heed to yourselves, then you take care of God's flock. The Holy Spirit has made you an overseer of the flock. And here's your job - you should shepherd the church of God." The word "shepherd," "*poimaino*," means do the work of a shepherd or feed, lead, care for, protect. Peter will be told that by Jesus (John 21:15-17). Peter will later write to his groups (1 Peter 5:2-4), "Feed the church of God among you. Take oversight over the church. Don't do it out of constraint but do it willingly. Don't do it for filthy lucre's sake but do it for a ready mind. Don't lord over God's people. Be examples to the flock. Because when

the Chief Shepherd appears," and that's not you, "you're going to receive a crown that won't fade away." Here's your job, pastors and overseers. Do this work and be faithful. How am I to care for God's people? I'm to feed them His Word. And it was a serious position because, let's face it, you're not my flock. You're His. Right? You and I, together, belong to Him. So I don't know if you've ever watched somebody else's things. I had a friend a few years ago that was watching a guy's house (supposedly), and then the guy's house got broken into, and he lost his car. And then his friend said, "I thought you were watchin' stuff." He goes, "Well, I tried," and he felt horrible. Or if you babysit someone else's kids. Those aren't your kids! I hope you're not lettin' 'em run around. What about God's flock? You're God's people! If I lash out at you, I lash out at His kids. If I say the wrong thing to you, if I mistreat you, if I speak evil of you behind your back, now I find myself at odds with God who is going to defend you. God holds you as precious. Paul said, "You feed God's people. It's His church, it's His congregation. It belongs to Him." Read Matthew 18 sometime, the first seven verses or so, where the Lord says, "Woe to him who stumbles one of these least kids of Mine," and then He talks about cement floaties. Well, He said, a millstone around your neck, go swimmin'. But it's cement floaties. Right? "Woe to those by whom offenses come."

And then notice what it says at the end of the verse (28), this flock of God, "which He purchased with His own blood." He paid a great price for you and me. We belong to Him. Not with corruptible things, not with gold, not with silver. Be careful how you deal with God's sheep. You know when you - I'm sure that some of you do, but - physiologically, when conception occurs, the twenty-three chromosomes from the man and the twenty-three chromosomes from the woman bind together to form the first cell, and with that comes the DNA as well. But from a genetic code standpoint, the bloodline is always following the chromosomes of the father. So it is the father's chromosomes that develop the bloodline. Well, Christianity is a blood religion. Right? We are washed in the blood of the Lamb. The life is in the blood. That's what Moses said to the people (Leviticus 17:11), and science agrees. Blood provides nourishment. How many quarts of blood do you have in your body? Do you know? Five. But in every microliter of blood there are five million red blood cells, which are kind of like little rafts - they carry around oxygen and potassium and amino acids, and they travel along 60,000 miles of veins and arteries in your body. I don't care if you're 5'2" or 6'10", you have 60,000 miles of capillaries and all. The blood cleanses. Right? Red blood cells are like garbage collectors. They remove toxins as they float by. They never take the good; they leave the good, take the bad. They're really discriminating. If you don't believe

how that works, just put a tourniquet on your arm and leave it there. Blood will clean or prevent infections from your life. The same microliter of blood that has five million red blood cells has about 300,000 platelets which are designed to form fibrinogens which clot over an area so that the red blood cells come crashing into them, and they cause a traffic jam, and now you've got coagulation. I know, I'm talking to you like little kids, but.....if there's not enough of them, you don't clot, you bleed. You still bleed. In that same microliter of blood, there are 7,000 white blood cells. You have about fifty million of them, in all, in your body. They're real good at isolating viruses. They die doing so. But you live. They neutralize them. One of the problems we've had with viruses and things like the AIDS virus is that viruses have spikes on the surface of their bodies, so they hinder white blood cells from being able to (these antibodies) neutralize these protrusions. So, that's been a big issue. But guys who invented things - like Jenner and Pasteur - these vaccine therapies that we have today, even get flu shots now made of protein. People that tell me, "Oh, I took a flu shot, I get sick," impossible. It's in your mind, it's in your head, it's only in your head. I have no idea; it's not in the Bible.

But if you apply the analogy to us, the blood of Jesus brings life to us. Right? "Unless you eat My body, drink My blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53), and the people went, "That sounds gross." And the Lord said, "No, these are spiritual words that I'm speaking to you" (John 6:63). His blood, shed, cleanses us. Right? "Confess your sins, and I shall cleanse you. He will cleanse you from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). His blood, shed, gives you spiritual health. We overcome by the blood of the Lamb.

So Paul is very interested that these men, as he gathers with them, recognize that ministry is a sacrifice, there's a cost involved. It's not easy to be a Christian, and it wasn't easy for Paul, but he was headed for where he believed God was sending him, and he was all in. He was going to run the race with joy. He was going to finish what God started. He had a message of grace that he wanted to deliver. And though he figured this might be the end of his relationship with these men, he wanted them to remember not only how he lived, but he also wanted them to remember what he did; he didn't leave the gospel out, he didn't leave the teaching of the Bible out. And I think that our commitment as a church here has always been to teach the whole Bible. We have several studies during the week and on Sundays. It's hard to get through sixty-six books in a month or a year, but we're always updating and trying to pick those books so that you get it all as quickly as we can get it to you. Because I think it's important that you know the Bible very well.

And Paul ended by saying, "That's what you have to do, and here's how you do it. You take care of yourself. And then, when you take care of yourself, you start to take care of God's flock. And to the point that He places you in a position of ministry, then shepherd them, feed them, bless them, pray for them. And then God will use you because this is His people, these are His blood-bought lives and souls." Pretty powerful.

Next week, we'd like to start at verse 29 and go to the end and listen to what Paul had to say before he packs up, and he heads for Jerusalem. And we'll go with him to all of the trouble that waits for him there. But next week, the end of Paul and the Ephesian elders' meeting. So read ahead to the end of the chapter, will you?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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