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Acts 20:22-38

Thirty-third Message

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## LAST WORDS:

# A LOOK AT WHAT MATTERS IN MINISTRY – 3

*SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME*

This morning we will complete our studies in the apostle Paul's final words to the Ephesian elders, from the 20th chapter of Acts. Paul and his companions were on their way to Jerusalem aboard a merchant ship, making a stop at Miletus. During the layover, the apostle asked the elders of the church at Ephesus to meet him, when he would give them final words of exhortation.

Paul's message divides into four sections, each separated by the words, "And now" (verses 22, 25 and 32). These markers are rather like our paragraph breaks. The words also mark a change in verb tenses. The first section, verses 18-21, deals with the past; the second division, verses 22-24, are in the present; and verses 25-31 are in the future. Finally, verses 32-35 are Paul's last will and testament, his legacy.

We have spent the last two Sundays looking at that first paragraph, where Paul reflected on his years of ministry in Ephesus. He summarized his ministry in two activities: making friends and imparting truth. We have looked at each of those essential elements: the relational aspect of ministry (befriending others and spending time with people, growing in the qualities that allow us to become better friends), and secondly, the revelational side of ministry (sharing with others what God is teaching us from the Scriptures). These are the basics, the essential elements, without which there is no ministry. Ministry is not that complicated. It is simply making friends and imparting truth. Everything else is superfluous.

Having looked back the past, Paul now turns to the present.

**"And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God."** (Acts 20:22-24 NASB)

Someone has said that when the apostle arrived in a new town, he checked out the local jail rather than a hotel, because that was usually where he ended up! Paul says he knew that bonds and afflictions awaited him; the prophets had

told him that. He was utterly realistic about his ministry; he expected adversity and suffering. But his response was that it didn't matter. His life was expendable. He was focused on his desire to complete the ministry to which he had been called, that of preaching God's glorious grace.

Paul refers to two things in this paragraph: his route and his ministry. He knew what his ministry was—to tell people of God's graciousness and love for the human race—but he didn't know what the route was. He knew what he was going to do when he got there, but he didn't always know where to go.

What we have in this paragraph therefore is a set of certainties and a set of uncertainties, which is really the make-up of ministry. Some things are static; they can be planned for. Others we simply cannot plan for. One thing about the Lord that is predictable is that he is totally unpredictable. We never know what God will do next.

Paul says he was on his way to Jerusalem (Plan A), but God had the right to alter that plan, i.e., to impose all sorts of interruptions, to set up divine appointments and conversations which the apostle never planned on. Life gets really exciting when we start living like that—believing that God is leading and directing our lives, and being sensitive to and dependent on the Spirit living inside us.

We need to plan, of course. I have my appointment book on my Treo. It has a number of appointments and meetings for this week, and also a few tasks that I hope to accomplish. Some of you have one-year plans, others have five-year plans. There is nothing wrong with planning and setting goals. These are important tools, and hopefully they are Spirit-led and empowered.

But the question we must always ask ourselves is, "Am I willing to let God interrupt those plans and do some planning apart from me, to bring people into my life whom I don't particularly want to see?" Am I willing to move toward them and open myself up to them? Am I able to trust that God is involved in all the circumstances of my life, working his good plan?

Once again, Jesus is our example. His methods must have been very confusing to the disciples. One day, our Lord suggested to them that they go to the other side of the sea, to Decapolis. The group boarded a boat, and a storm began to

rage. Arriving on the other side, they dragged the boat onto the beach. Then a madman from the tombs came out and attacked Jesus and the disciples. Jesus cast out the legion of demons, and the man asked to go with Jesus. But the Lord told him to go home and tell people of the great things that God had done for him.

Then he told the disciples, “Get back in the boat. Let’s return to the other side.” Sometimes I try to imagine what the disciples were thinking. They might have thought, “C’mon, we’ve been rowing for eight hours. We finally get here and meet one person. Now you tell us to get back in the boat and we have to row all the way over to the other side.” The demon-possessed man told everyone about what God had done, and they were amazed. There was huge crowd of people who wanted to hear what he had to say.

Now do you plan that? The Lord explained it this way, “I don’t do anything unless the Father tells me. I don’t say anything, except what the Father says.” So every day, Jesus spent time alone with his Father, sometimes an entire night, seeking to know what his Father was doing; then it was his joy to participate in that activity. He did only what the Father directed him.

That is what makes life exciting—waking up every day and joining God in what he is doing. While we are asleep, our Father is working. And we have the privilege of waking up each morning and praying, “Lord, I have no idea what you have planned for me today. I know what I have planned, and I am going to pursue that, because I believe you were involved in it. But you have the right to change my direction and bring into my life that which I wouldn’t encounter on my own.” When you live like that, you realize that there are no accidents, no coincidences. The Lord plans our lives to get us to the right place at the right time. And that takes the pressure out of ministry. I already know what to do when I get there. I am going to make friends and impart God’s graciousness. But I don’t always know where that is going to be.

Having said that, I would like to share with you something that we as board of elders are very excited about. We ask you to join with us in prayer about this. It has never been our desire to become a mega-church. We feel strongly that God has called us to equip others and send them out to ministry. We have always had a desire to start another church, and we been praying for years for God’s direction on this matter. Each time we brought it up in the past, the timing never seemed right.

Well, for a number of reasons the elders believe the time has come for us to start another church. And, like the apostle Paul, we know the ministry; we just don’t know the course. We know what we are going to do when we get there, but we don’t know exactly where that is. We are simply trusting

God and his direction. As it turns out, a number of people in the Willow Glen area of San Jose who attend here have praying for a long time that we would start a church in that area. Some of us are planning to gather at the home of Clint and Debbie Kelly, who live in the Willow Glen area, in a couple of weeks to pray. Please pray with us.

Now Paul looks to the future.

**“And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, 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 did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for 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. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” (20:25-31)**

Reading this paragraph, we are immediately struck with the value that is placed on the church. God purchased the church with his blood. It should humble us to remember that the church is not ours, but God’s. I always get a little uncomfortable when pastors talk about “my church.” The obvious point here is that the church belongs to God. We serve as under-shepherds to the great Shepherd.

This also tells us something of the high value that God places on people. Referring to the church, Paul is not talking about a building or an organization, but about you and me, the people of God. God loves us. We are infinitely valuable to him. People are God’s most important product. That is all the more amazing when we look at the metaphor Paul uses to describe the church—that of sheep and shepherds. Sheep aren’t the clean, cuddly creatures they appear to be. In fact, they are dirty. They are subject to unpleasant pests, and need to be dipped in strong chemicals to rid them of lice, ticks and worms. They are also unintelligent, wayward and obstinate.

That’s the metaphor God uses to describe us. We are filthy and awful and stupid! Therefore if we are going to be faithful to care about each other the way we should, we have to remember how valuable we are in God’s sight. As John Stott writes, “They are the flock of God the Father, purchased by the precious blood of God the Son, and supervised by overseers appointed by God the Holy Spirit. If the three persons of the Trinity are committed to the welfare of God’s people, should we not be also?”<sup>1</sup>

Therefore it's a terrible thing when the flock is disturbed and damaged by wolves from both inside and out. Paul says there will be attacks from two places. First, there will be wolves who attack from the outside. That is a reference to people who are obviously non-Christians—cynics and skeptics, those who are antagonistic in their approach.

But he says there will also be attacks from within, from wolves in sheep's clothing. They come from within the church and appear to be Christians. They will come from among you, that is, they will be pastors and shepherds, leaders. There are men and women pastoring congregations all over this country who aren't even Christians. They don't believe the Scriptures. They haven't based their lives on the authority of God's word and submitted themselves to his lordship.

So Paul tells these leaders that this is what they can expect, and when they see it, they need to deal with it, to admonish like he did. He gives these elders two priorities in verse 28. First, guard yourself; and second, protect the flock. These priorities are in that order because elders cannot care adequately for others if they neglect the care of their own inner life.

I always remember the advice someone gave me when I was in seminary. He said, "You concern yourself with the depth of your life, and let God concern himself with the breadth of your ministry." Those were wise words. Ministry is meant flow out of worship. Sometimes the greatest enemy of our ministry is ministry. I have met many pastors and missionaries and others in ministry who are so tired and weary and worn out, they often say that they have no time for God. They are so busy ministering, they have no time with God.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest who has written many books, tells of a time in his own life early in his ministry. He asked Mother Teresa what he could do to be more effective in his ministry. She said, with characteristic simplicity, "Henri, spend one hour a day in devotion to Jesus and you will be all right." So many of us get caught up with the frantic pace of our ministries that we really have no time for adoration and devotion and worship. Like one of those great spinning wheels at the park that kids push to make them go around, the safest place to be is right in the center. If you are on the edge, you are liable to get thrown off. We need to take the time to care about our own spiritual formation and direction and the nurturing of our own spiritual life, because that is the key to ministry. Everything flows out of our life and devotion to Christ.

And so I ask this morning: Are we taking heed to ourselves? Are we growing in our understanding of the Scriptures? Here is the book that tells us how to live life effectively and powerfully. Are you reading the Scriptures? Are you

welcoming the truth into your life, non-defensively? Are you embracing the truth and seeking to embody it? That is where our authority comes from.

The second priority is to guard the flock. The primary way a shepherd tends the sheep is that he is with them and leads them to pasture. He feeds them. Just teach the Scriptures. You don't have to go on a witch-hunt. The best defense is a good offense. You don't need to mount any sort of attack on these false teachers. Just teach the word. If you have a brother or sister who is wandering away, go get him or her. If they are wandering away theologically or morally, go rescue them.

After exhorting the Ephesian elders, Paul now gives them his final commendation.

**"And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my {own} needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship. (20:32-38)**

Paul says, "I am leaving, but I am leaving behind two things that will enable you to maintain your own walk with God. I worked hard to support myself and the men who accompanied me, and I did so because Jesus said that it was more blessed to give than to receive." This is one of the lost sayings of Jesus. The phrase doesn't occur anywhere in the gospels. But evidently it was in circulation, and Paul quotes it here, so it wasn't really lost.

His point is that he didn't have much to leave behind. He had no silver or gold or material things to give them. But what he had to give them was of infinite value, the God of the Word and the Word of God. That's all we really need. We don't need success in this world. We don't need a great deal of money or power. We don't even need a mate, as much as it hurts to be alone. Ultimately, what we need to make our way through life is God and his Word. That is what will enable us to cope. And that is the greatest legacy we could ever leave behind. We may not be able to leave much to our children materially, but what we all can leave behind is a legacy of dependence upon God and his word; that we would know God's word, and through that word we would come to know him.

That's our purpose. That's why we do what we do. We preach the Scriptures. We proclaim to you the nature of Christ, and through that word we see the Lord, we come to know him, and we worship him and depend on him, with the result that we come to display increasing glory. That's what Paul means when he says in 2 Corinthians, "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

That's our ministry. That's what we do. We go about getting people to look at the face of Jesus by teaching the word. And as people see his face, as they come to know him, to love him and fellowship with him and enjoy his presence, their lives are changed almost unconsciously. They begin to reflect the character of God himself. So our ministry is one of teaching people the secret of character transformation. As believers, we have the ministry of imparting beauty to people's lives.

And so Paul sailed off, continuing to give his life to Christ, providing us with an example of what matters in ministry. Like the apostle, may we give ourselves to God and to the people he loves, befriending others and imparting to them the truth he has revealed to us.

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1990), 329.

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