

The Review of Paul's Ministry in Ephesus
Acts 20:17-27

Our text this morning will be Acts chapter 20:17-27, and I encourage you to turn there. This is the third - we're in the third missionary journey of Paul's journeys of bringing the gospel to the world. It started in Jerusalem in the first eight chapters of Acts, and then moved through Judea Samaria, the surrounding regions of Jerusalem. Now, for the last half of the book of Acts, from Acts 13 to the end of the book, chapter 28, we'll be focused on the gospel expanding to the remotest part of the world (the known world, the Roman Empire), and in that, we'll be focusing on Paul. So, Paul had a first missionary journey to modern-day Turkey, then he had a second missionary journey, expanded it to Greece, and now we're in the third missionary journey. Pretty much right in the middle of it because it goes all the way to chapter 21-16 from chapter 18.

And the focal point of the third missionary journey is the city of Ephesus. He spends three years there ministering to this town. He starts like he starts in all the missionary journeys in Antioch, moves through the churches where he visited and planted in the first missionary journey, moves to Greece on the other side of the Aegean Sea where he visits people that he had been with planting churches in Macedonia, Achaia, towns that you have letters in your Bibles, Thessalonica, Corinth, Philippi. So, he now is coming back toward Jerusalem, retracing his steps, and he will come back to visit the people who are leading the church in Ephesus. So, he'd spent three years there in Ephesus, traveled to visit the churches that he had established in the second missionary journey. Now, he's headed back by ship, and we'll look at this visit that he makes in a town called Miletus with the leaders of the church of Ephesus which he'd founded in the second missionary journey five years earlier.

At the end of the second missionary journey, he passes through Ephesus, establishes the church there, leaves Priscilla and Aquila there in Acts chapter 18, and now he goes back there for a final time to minister to the leaders of this church. So, there's Ephesus on the western coast of the province of Asia, which is in the western side of now modern-day Turkey, and just south of Ephesus is this town of Miletus. Ephesus was a large city, maybe the fourth largest city of the Roman Empire. It was the spiritual capital of the Roman Empire. It had the temple of Artemis - the largest building in the

Roman Empire. Like Rome was the military capital, Corinth was the capital of immorality. Athens was the cultural capital. Ephesus was the spiritual capital, and they prided themselves on their spiritual worship in Ephesus. So, visiting these people, the church there, they had a daunting task in this town of cacophony of conflicting spiritual teachings there.

His visit with them encompasses the rest of Acts chapter 21, but I'm only going to get to the initial part, this review of Paul's ministry in Acts 20:17-21. The rest of chapter 20 we'll cover in other messages. So, let's read it though because I'd like to kind of cover it all together. I just want to spend more time than we have this morning on other parts of it, too. So, I kind of divided it up into the sections that we have. We have today's section, the review of Paul's ministry in Ephesus, then we'll have the responsibility of the elders that he charges them with in verses 28-31, and then verses 32-35, the resources that are available to these church leaders. But read in your Bible, and I'll read in mine. You can follow along so you get the context of the entire message that Paul gives these church leaders starting in verse 17; "From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them, 'You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, bound by the 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, so 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. And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. 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. 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.' ”

So, this is his message to these leaders, these elders in the church of Ephesus. This, in one speech, one message in this book that it was actually heard by the author himself; Luke, he heard this with his own ears. This is part of one of the sections where he's included with the pronoun “we.” Most of the other messages that we hear, we find he had to have heard this from other people, and it'd be reported to him, and he provides this for us, but the spirit enabled Luke to give an eyewitness account to this message. So, as we look at verses 17-27, we'll look at this past review, initially, of Paul's dedication, his devotion, his commitment to these men that he'd been with for three years in Ephesus. And it starts out where Paul calls them from Miletus. Now, the reason he does that, if you recall, is because he has a plan to get to Jerusalem for Pentecost. His plan is to meet with the church at Jerusalem, to be with them and the gathering of the Jews who had been celebrating the Day of Pentecost, which would be the anniversary of the church from a couple of decades earlier, was something he wanted to be there for. So, he's on the clock. He had a timetable, and in order to keep his timetable, rather than travel to Ephesus and spend time with the entire church, he just called the elders, the church leaders, to Miletus where the ship he was on was docked and spoke to them there. This was to expedite his visit. These hearers would have a personal experience with Paul's testimony of his ministry.

So when you kind of read this story here, this biographical account, actually it's an autobiographical account; in the subset of biographies, there's autobiographies. I personally have enjoyed biographies and autobiographies. In fact, the very first book I ever read (I think I was in the second grade at the time) and it was the autobiography of Eddie Rickenbacker. He was the leading fighter pilot in World War I; and you're wondering, why are you reading this in second grade? Well, if you know me, you know I don't have

very good eyesight. I didn't have glasses then. I was an only child. I'm stuck in the backseat for days on end so I'm going to do something with my time so just liked reading stuff like this even from an early age. One thing I've noticed and in particularly autobiographies (people writing of themselves - kind of their memoirs), they like to present themselves in glowing terms. Right? They're looking to have a story about themselves - they're not going to write about all their problems and how messed up they were (unless it ends up in a really good story). Well, Paul's writing's different in that his audience (the people he was talking to) when he's giving this account of his time in Ephesus, how he was with them "...with all humility and with tears..." and he "...did not shrink from declaring to [them] anything..." he's talking to people who were there, who were with him. Have you ever heard somebody tell some stories, and you were there too? And you go, huh, that's not how I remember this. Well, I think these people would have had the opportunity to validate what he was saying, and that was true that he was with them in all humilities and trials he's speaking about - him not shrinking back from his teaching and being committed to them to finish the course of his ministry. This was not just a story. This was the truth, and they were able to validate this.

So, these elders that have come to Miletus, you have to notice here that we have an identifiable established group of men. This was something that Paul set up when he founded the church. What we have in church leadership in the New Testament is a group of leaders called elders, and this ends up why we do this today. This is serving as a model, a church leadership model, for us today. It's not 'til you get to the second century that you start finding an individual leader over say the church of Rome or a Bishop of Rome or Bishop of Antioch or a Bishop of Ephesus. It's not 'til later that this happens. The establishment of the church shared leadership with a group of men, and we find this once again here in Ephesus. So, this is why we do what we do here at our church - so not having the leadership of our church vested in one individual with their great ideas of dynamic leadership and so forth. You know, if you do that with Jesus then, hey, He's a great leader, but the rest of us are all kind of, like, we have flaws and warts, and not every idea we have is a great idea. So this is why the collective group is beneficial, and the Scripture gives a model for this.

So as we're reading what Paul did there, from the whole time he was there, he was serving "...with all humility and with tears..." and dealing with the

plots of the Jews. We see this so often; he goes to different cities, whether its Philippi or Thessalonica, he's being run out of places and being attacked and left for dead. We saw that in Lystra and Derbe. He continues to be faithful in publicly teaching them and then from house to house. This teaching publicly that he mentions has to undoubtedly refer back to the passage in Acts 19:9-10 where he's "...reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus." And whether they rented this or whether this was just a large hall that was available to them, but this is how he taught over three years at this public place, but he also taught from house to house. And this is similar to what we have where we have teaching going on not just in a church building (they didn't have church buildings - they had houses). Undoubtedly, Paul's teaching wasn't just happening once a week. He was with people, but he was with people in their homes, teaching the gathering of believers; like what we do in our home Bible study groups called Growth Groups which, once again, I encourage you to attend. It really is a great opportunity for you to build yourself up in the faith and share that with others and be strengthened by the fellowship that we have during the week. As you consider that, we look at what Paul did. He was instructing them, and how was he instructing them? This phrasing says, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house..." He taught them everything "...that was profitable." He didn't back away. He didn't shrink back from teaching things that might be difficult.

And you can understand that. Human nature is... some people might not be receiving things. It might not be what they think. It might be a little difficult to tell them something they might not agree with. Paul didn't let that deter him. He pushed forward, not holding back anything that was profitable for them. This is part of the learning process. It's sort of a given that we will know things and not have everything understood clearly. And we need to learn - so that requires some information to come our direction that we might not know or we might not even initially agree with and need to learn and be convinced of. So this is part of the discipleship process. Paul was doing that in Ephesus, and he didn't shrink back.

So, when we have people that don't teach the whole council of God, churches that selectively teach things, really it doesn't serve people well. It doesn't serve people faithfully to cherry-pick just parts of the Bible. Even though it's kind of natural, like we could just get into thinking the church needs to hear about this subject because we have problems in the church in

that area. Or, the people of the church are just interested in this subject so we'll teach on that subject; that's what they're wanting to be learning about. We're trying to move through the entire Scripture. One of the values of teaching through the Scripture like we do here, kind of verse after verse after verse, we don't just get to choose what we want to teach, but it just kind of comes our way, and we have to deal with it. So, selectively teaching might be natural, or human nature, to think you have ideas that are more important, but really the Scripture has ideas that are more important, and if we're faithful to what it's teaching, then we will teach what God thinks is the most important rather than what I think is the most important. It's just gotten so sophisticated in our day and age that there's even churches that intentionally decide the best thing to do is selectively teach because the greatest good is to get more people in your church, and to teach certain things in the Scripture just creates conflict and discussions about things that take away from that; so to try to get everybody kind of on board with more people, then if we kind of avoid things, like we don't want to necessarily hear what Nathan read this morning on Ephesians 1:3-4, that God "...chose us in Him before the foundation of the world..." and "...predestined us to adoption..." Some people don't agree with that, so why bring that up, or looking at parts of the Bible that might be more challenging for people, or beginning of Galatians, or maybe the end times stuff? There's lots of different opinions on this so let's just avoid that. So this attempt by churches to selectively teach in order to achieve an end, in the end, doesn't build up a strong church because we are choosing what we think is more important - better to choose what the Scripture teaches and just move through this; and the end of this is that we will understand the entire teaching of the council of God, and we won't be shrinking back from anything that's profitable. So, that's why we do what we do.

As Paul's going along with this story of how his ministry at Ephesus was, we find him solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and we see this one more time; faith and repentance, they're inextricably linked and they're central to Paul's ministry. They get coupled together, two sides of the same coin, and note the phrase here. When we see the word "repentance," repentance is toward God. When we repent, it isn't just, oh, I goofed up. Oops! Or, I hurt this person. Hey, I'm sorry about that. I won't do it again. Or, this really works out badly. I'm going to learn my lesson and do this right from now on. Repentance is toward God, not just making our life better and reforming

our self. So, when we are repentant and when we have faith in Jesus Christ, this is something that's vertical, not just horizontal, not just dealing with the people around us, but it's fundamentally toward God, and that we see that we have offended. We have sinned. We have rebelled against God Himself, and that constitutes Biblical repentance. The rest of this is fleshing it out, and when we go to faith, we see faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our trust is in Him - that's faith, and that is central to Paul's ministry. It's the cornerstone of his message of solemnly testifying to the Jews. So this is what he did in Ephesus

And then he talks about the present difficulty he's facing in verse 22; "And now, behold, bound by the 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." Places he goes to, he ends up in trouble, and we already have Jews in Jerusalem that have been persecuting the church. In fact, we saw that as early as Acts chapter 6 and the dispersion of the Hellenistic Jews out because of the persecution of the non-Christian Jews there. And since then, Jerusalem's not an easy place that Paul is going to. He's aware of this that lies ahead. So, what's his attitude toward it? "...not knowing what will happen to me there..." ... "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself..." That's his attitude. Paul had a long-standing plan to return to Jerusalem. We saw that back in Acts 19:21 that he was intending to get to Jerusalem. In spite of the looming difficulties that would await there, he was not deterred from this mission. He knew that trials awaited. Trials await us. We know that all who desire to live Godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. "But [he did] not consider {his} life of any account as dear to [himself]..." He was willing to push through.

That just so happened to be our theme this weekend at our men's retreat, our man camp. So, when I was up there yesterday, Jim as he does, has hats for everyone, in Greek. So, when you see these hats (and there'll be a Greek phrase), it says, "lose your life," So, now you know, and so you can kind of impress your friends there. Right? The theme of our retreat was "losing your life," and that was a message that Paul lived; "But [he did] not consider {his} life of any account as dear to [himself]..." Or, he said it in other ways, like in Galatians 2:20; "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me..." This internal conviction is a whole-hearted desire to serve the Lord. Or, as Matthew 16:25 puts it, "For whoever

wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” That’s what Jesus said. So, if you’re looking to save your life, if you’re looking to make life better for yourself, if you’re thinking Christianity’s a great way to kind of get God on my side and help me out, you have it all wrong. Your life is going to end up in destruction. Your life is going to be lost. It is going to fade away to nothing, and you are destined for eternal destruction. Following Jesus Christ means you lose your life for His sake. He’s not your helper. You’re His servant. You are living for Him, not Him for you.

So, in our world, there’s people, they don’t consider their life of any account. Maybe they just are fed up living, and they’ll be done with their life. Or, there’s people that are committed to a lie and deeply committed, so they’ll give their life for a lie. This isn’t just stopping with, “But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself...” It builds on that 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.” There’s a purpose for us giving our life to the Lord, and that is for us to live for Him and to serve Him and “...to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” That’s what we’re doing. This is our mission. “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” That is Jesus’s message. That’s what Paul lived out.

So, verse 25 - we get to this pending departure; he’s about to leave. Verse 25; he says, “And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face.” This is a poignant moment here for this church. They’d been with him for three years. They had had their lives shared with Paul. This was a dear person to them. So, we go to the end of the chapter, and we find them weeping aloud in verse 37, embracing Paul and repeatedly kissing him because there’s no plan for them ever to see him again. So, his departure is imminent, and what does he say? What is the phrasing he gives here? “...I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face.” Paul’s task of preaching the kingdom was synonymous with his task “...to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” His ministry was preaching which was telling people about the kingdom of God.

This is a big issue in the Bible, including in the book of Acts. Remember, we started the book of Acts with the apostles gathered when Jesus appeared to

them for the last time, saying, is it this time You're going to establish Your Kingdom? "He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority..." Then we go through and we find the kingdom coming again and again in different messages that are being given. Until the very end, the last sentence of the book of Acts, they're still preaching the Kingdom. Well, what is this kingdom? Well, when Jesus ascended into heaven, chapter 1: 9-11 of Acts, what did the angels say as He ascended? He's going to return just the way He left. And why is He returning? He is going to return to be the King over the Kingdom. For now, He has left His church "...to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.", and to continue this work of "...preaching the kingdom..." So, why is this important? The gospel is beyond propositional statements about the death and resurrection of Christ for our sin; it encompasses the totality of what God has prepared for His people.

And I say that because in western modern Christianity, we like propositional statements. We like to distil things down into the gospel. In fact, if I gave you all three-by-five cards, and I said, what is the gospel? (And I know some of you are deep in your knowledge of the Scripture, and I have great confidence in you explaining the gospel to people), but if I said write this out on a three-by-five card, I would get back differences. I mean, there would be a lot of similarity, obviously, but I would not get back a formula. And why would I not get back a formula? I would not get back a formula because there is no formula in the Scriptures of the gospel. That's why Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called the gospels. That's the good news of Jesus Christ. It is not simply the death, resurrection of Jesus Christ for sin (I mean, it is that. That's the cornerstone of our faith.), but it's even bigger than that. This coming of Jesus for sin includes the testimony of the prophets of this. It includes Him being rejected. It includes Him coming to establish His kingdom, and that is what awaits for us. So, this deliverance, the good news of Jesus Christ who delivered us from sin, has a destination and that destination is the kingdom of God. And that isn't just Jesus's ruling now in your hearts, it is that Jesus will come and establish His rule on the earth, and that is what we are looking for, and that is what we will be delivered to. So, let's understand that the good news of Jesus Christ is beyond certain propositional statements, but it is the totality of the good news of the teaching of Jesus Christ - as Paul puts it, "...preaching the kingdom..." We have something great to look forward to, and we're looking to help people

be rescued from destruction and be delivered with us to the Kingdom that waits for us.

Now, we've got this last section. It's a little interesting, and this is his dedication - persistent dedication, and here's how Paul phrases it, "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." And you read this and go, how's Paul "...innocent of the blood of all men"? I didn't know he was being accused of being guilty "...of the blood of all men..." So, in what sense is he "...innocent of the blood of all men"? What does that mean? The answer to this, the key to understanding this, is the context - the context! What is the context of this statement, so we understand in what sense he's "...innocent of the blood of all men"? Well, there's the big context, and there's the mere context. The larger context, the Bible context, takes us back to the book of Ezekiel, which Paul would've been familiar with, and there is this idea in Ezekiel 33:7-9, and I'll read this for you, and I'll give you, actually, the verses so you can read along, too; "Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth and give them warning from Me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand. But if you on your part warn a wicked man to turn from his way and he does not turn from his way, he will die in his iniquity, but you have delivered your life.' " Sounds pretty serious, doesn't it?

When God intended for people to represent Him, He meant that they were now responsible to be faithful to that. So then, we can see when Paul is having his ministry in Ephesus, why he took that so seriously, and why he needed to be as faithful as he was. Okay, that's the Bible context. Now, there's the immediate context, the preceding context to Paul's commitment was, "...to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" or "...preaching the kingdom..." the fulfillment of his ministry - then there's a following context, what comes right after this. So, we have "therefore" that puts this right before that; "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men." And then, verse 27 explains this; "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." So, he's innocent because he, "...did not shrink from declaring ... the whole purpose

of God.” So, on that basis, he was not guilty. The ball was in their court to respond. Okay, so that’s the sense.

We become guilty when we fail to do what we ought to do and that’s known of the sin of omission. James 4:17; “Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.” You may be thinking, uh oh, gee, there’s people that I’ve known that I didn’t, like, try to help - I just kind of let come in and out of my life, and oops! You mean I’m guilty? And I’d say, yeah. This is why sin is so all encompassing and why we need such forgiveness because it’s not just the bad things we do, it’s all of the things we should’ve done that we’re not doing, and this is why this is impossible for us individually. We need one another, and this is why Paul was teaching “...the whole purpose of God.” to the Ephesian elders. In other words, who is his audience here when he says I did not shrink from “...the whole purpose of God...”? It was the church of Ephesus that’s who he was teaching “...the whole purpose of God.” to. Now. I don’t want to get you too confused here; no one is going to end up in eternal destruction because you didn’t do something. Honestly, you and I we’re not that important. You know, we are not that pivotal to someone’s salvation. This is the work of God; “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26) He doesn’t need you. He doesn’t need me. He’s going to do it with or without us, but He wants to do it with us, and He’s given us opportunities, and He’s given us responsibilities, and we want to live our life and finish our course - as Paul said, to be faithful “...to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God”, but when we fail He’s faithful even though we are faithfulness “...He cannot deny Himself.” And His purposes will go on.

So, how does this work out for us? Well, when the church is taught “...the whole purpose of God...”, the result will be the people of the world will be having an opportunity to hear of Christ, and that’s what happened with Ephesus, Paul’s ministry there. He could say, “...I am innocent of the blood of all men...” because he was faithful in not shrinking back “...from declaring ... the whole purpose of God...” to the church of Ephesus. When we declare “...the whole purpose of God...”, when we teach “...the whole purpose of God...”, when we’re faithful to that as a church, the natural expectation of what happens with this is the people who are faithful will receive this and act upon it. Now, you may not act perfectly upon it, but this doesn’t just rest on you; this is all of us together, and together we can

faithfully represent Jesus Christ to our community around us, and give people the opportunity to know of Him and to learn of Him.

So when we get to verses 28-30 and we read about the difficulty of churches when "...ravenous wolves" come and all the disunity that happens with this, we will see that the protection of the church is essential for us being faithful to proclaim the "...purpose of God..." Our role is to follow in Paul's footsteps. He's an example to us. He said to us, 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ." And as we do this and we are faithful to proclaim "...the whole purpose of God..." and we build up the church, the result of that is people will be reached, and God's purposes will go forward. So, active participation in a church that is faithful to "...the whole purpose of God..." will enable us (you, me) to finish our course according to the will of God. We need each other to do this. And we need a faithful church to do this in the context of; and that's why God had Paul plant this church of Ephesus, and why they were faithful to this. So, may that be a testimony to us to be faithful to "...the whole purpose of God...", to be communicating the great gospel of the Kingdom to the world around us.