

# 'HAVING PUT ON THE BREAST-PLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS...'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

By Ron Ritchie

---

Last October, my wife Anne Marie and I were driving through the Highlands of Scotland, an area of beautiful mountains and meadows, when we happened to see two shepherds caring for a large flock of sheep in a field. We parked our car and walked over to the fence to observe what was going on. The chief shepherd was leading his flock of 200 sheep around in a large circle. Every now and then he would instruct his undershepherd to grab a sheep, lay him on his back and hold him, while he himself worked on the sheep's hooves. Seeing us, the chief shepherd (whose name by wonderful coincidence happened to be Paul) came toward us and asked if he could assist us in any way. We introduced ourselves and I told him that I also was a shepherd. By watching him, I said, I hoped to become a better one!

I then explained that I was a pastor, and asked him what he was doing by casting certain sheep on their backs and examining them. He replied that the flock had just returned from the high country and he was in the process of preparing them to graze in the lower pastures. Many of the sheep had been injured during the time in the mountains and he was in the act of observing which of them were hurt. To help him observe, he drove them around in a circle while he watched for those which were limping. When he saw one, he called to the undershepherd to grab the sheep, cast him on his back, and he then examined his hoofs to see what was causing the limp. As we talked, two of the sheep jumped over the straw bales that were being used as a gate. I immediately alerted the chief shepherd that the sheep were getting away, but with a beautiful Scottish grin, he said, "Don't worry, my lad, my dogs will bring them back." At his command, two dogs jumped the gate and within a couple of minutes the sheep were back in the fold once more.

As I watched, I could not help but think that I was witnessing a wonderful illustration of the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is our Chief Shepherd, and that as such he has appointed shepherds, who are known as elders, to care, feed and protect his flock in the Age of the Spirit.

In the passage from the book of Acts to which we have come in our studies in the life of the shepherd Paul, today we will look at Acts 20:17-38. Paul has been tending, guarding and teaching the flock of God at Ephesus for the three years 54-57 A.D. Now he is ready to leave Ephesus and go on to the churches in Greece where he will take up the money that had been collected for famine relief in Jerusalem. A year later he arrives at the port of Miletus. He sends for the elders from the church at Ephesus to come and spend time with him before he leaves for Jerusalem. The apostle's farewell message to the Ephesian elders is a classic for all generations of elders. Here we will discover the message that was dear to Paul's heart as he sets out the spiritual responsibilities of shepherds of the flock of Jesus Christ. His message has the same tone as the message of Jesus to the disciples in the Upper Room, with words of both encouragement and warning.

Behind this message which we are about to hear from the lips of Paul is the theme of spiritual warfare. As we have already seen, when Paul first arrived in Ephesus he was aware of a wide open door for ministry for him in that city, but there were also many adversaries to be faced. Thus we find the apostle appears as both shepherd and soldier in this passage. Writing from his prison cell in Rome some years later, he would say in chapter 6 of his letter to the Ephesians,

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth...

Paul is saying that the Christian must wrap his life around Christ because Jesus is the truth. He is the only one who can explain what reality is and is not. It is he who defines evil and good. No one else is competent to do so.

The apostle continues in Ephesians 6:14b,

and having put on the breastplate of righteousness...

Paul was well aware that every Christian is involved in a spiritual battle, but he also knew that God has already provided for his own the "full armor of God," Christ himself, in order that the Christian might "stand firm" as the battle raged around him. Here we have insight into Paul's realization of his own secure standing before God, no matter what the circumstances. In this immediate context, Paul has "put on the breastplate of righteousness." The Roman breastplate was a sleeveless, vest-like piece of bronze backed with a tough piece of cowhide. This breastplate protected all the vital organs of the chest and stomach, especially the heart, the most vital of all organs. Satan attacks the Christian by going for his heart. He attempts to defeat him by telling him he is no good, and that God could not possibly accept him. But when we come to Jesus Christ and accept him as Lord and Savior, his righteousness is given to us so it is no longer a question of our righteousness. Not only are we forgiven our sins but we are clothed with the very righteousness of Christ himself. Henceforth God the Father sees us as righteous because we are in his Son. But Satan will use every wicked device he has in order to attack our emotions. He tries to get us to feel sorry for ourselves, to doubt the love of God, to think we are not forgiven our sins, and especially to forget that it is not our own righteousness but Christ's righteousness that counts. In Isaiah 61:10 we read,

"I will rejoice greatly in the Lord,  
My soul will exult in my God.  
For he has clothed me with  
garments of salvation,  
He has wrapped me with a robe  
of righteousness."

Christ is the ground of our acceptance before God (2 Cor. 5:21). We are accepted in the Beloved, without qualification or reservation. This truth will guard our hearts and our emotions and enable us to live the Christian life with security and joy.

This deep sense of spiritual security, which can only come through a personal relationship with Christ, can be detected all through Paul's address to the Ephesian elders.

### **I. Secure in Christ's message, Acts 20:17-27**

And 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 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. And now, behold, I know that you all, 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.

In verses 17 through 19 we get a glimpse of Paul's attitude as a servant of Christ. He says he had been with

them body, soul and spirit for three years and that he had the singleminded purpose of declaring to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. He ministered with a sense of humility, with tears and with trials which he suffered because of the plots of the Jews. Included in these trials to which he is referring were the times when he was forced out of the synagogue and driven next door (Acts 19:19); when he had fought with wild beasts (1 Cor.15:32); he had many adversaries among the Jews in high places (1 Cor.16:9); he had received the sentence of death (2 Cor.1:8-10); and was beaten times without number (2 Cor.11:23).

Next, in verses 20,21, Paul reviews the message which he had preached in Ephesus. As he perhaps was sitting on board the ship which would take him to Israel, he reviewed his three years of ministry among them. He said he "did not shrink," i.e. he had never let down his sails regardless of storms or rough seas, in declaring, announcing to them the gospel of Jesus Christ which they needed for their spiritual and emotional wholeness. He had taught publicly, he said, in the synagogue during his first and second visits. Then, after he was forced out of the synagogue, he went to the Hall of Tyrannus where he taught for two years, and later went from house to house.

During all of this time he was testifying to Jews and Gentiles alike "the message of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." This is the term which the apostle used all through his letter to the Romans, which he had written in Corinth. "Repentance toward God" means to change your mind about your view of Jesus. The Lord was not merely a good teacher or a prophet of God, nor was he a false messiah. He was God's Son come in the flesh, the long-awaited Messiah. "Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" meant that they had placed their faith in Jesus as the Christ based on the evidence which Paul had declared from the Old Testament; the signs and wonders they had seen performed among them; and the witness of Paul's changed life. It was that faith that had saved them from the wrath of God, and then they were given the gift of the Holy Spirit and eternal life. That is what being born again means. The man or woman who has placed his or her faith in Jesus Christ begins a lifestyle of repenting of the flesh and choosing instead to walk by faith in Christ.

Continuing, in verses 22 through 24, Paul says that his life was not his own. Ever since the day on the Damascus Road when he encountered Christ, who declared that Paul was "a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel," Paul's mission in life had been to "testify solemnly of the grace of God." He had a course to run, a witness to share, and a gospel to preach. But now he says that he is "bound in spirit," and that he is on his way to Jerusalem. It is unclear whether he means that he was bound by the Holy Spirit or he felt bound in his own spirit. What we do know, however, is that he was told by the Holy Spirit that "bonds and afflictions" awaited him. The question as to exactly what Paul meant will be answered later as he gets closer to Jerusalem.

And the apostle had a clear conscience, he says in 25-27. As he sat down with these Ephesian elders, Paul sensed that this was the last time he would see them in this life. Here were men whom he personally had led to Christ. He had encouraged them, ministered with them and wept with them. As he looked to what lay ahead for him his spirit became heavy within him. He was "innocent of the blood of all men," he said, as he reviewed his ministry among them during the three years he remained in Ephesus. He was faithful to preach, teach, declare and testify to the gospel of Jesus Christ; thus he was "innocent of the blood of all men." How I wish I could say that! At times, although I know what God would have me do, I find a way to not do it. But God quickly convicts me that when I gave my life to him, I also gave my rights to him to do with me what he pleased. I have been "crucified with him," and dead men have no rights.

Finally, Paul says, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." This is an interesting term which means he had never lowered his sails. He had never shrunk from declaring to them anything that was spiritually profitable.

A study of the Scriptures reveals over and over the four-fold purpose of God in Christ. First, Paul had taught the Ephesians that God was in the business of redeeming men and women. After his Messiah had been rejected by the Jews, God had turned to the Gentiles in the Age of the Spirit and was calling out a people to form the Body of Christ on earth. And the purpose behind this was, as Paul says in Philippians, "that we might know Him." This would result in our having life abundant, as our Lord promised, life as it was intended to be lived, both here and in eternity.

Second, the Scriptures reveal God's plan for the New Covenant, the new basis for living, the Christian's relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so that he no longer counts on himself but on the power of God working through him to accomplish his purposes. Third, the Scriptures teach how we should relate to Christ and to each other--the concept of Body Life. Here we learn about spiritual gifts, how we should minister to one another, and about our oneness in the Spirit. And fourth, the Scriptures clearly teach that there is a spiritual battle going on all the time--Spiritual Warfare, we call it. Satan is constantly busy in his work of trying to break down and destroy all of the relationships we have just mentioned. Flesh and blood therefore are not the enemy, but Satan, who tries to divide and defeat us. These are the concepts that Paul declared to the elders at Ephesus. He did not shrink from declaring these things to them while he was among them.

Just a few hours before the *Conference on Biblical Exposition* (COBE II) opened, I was privileged to be at a meeting with Ray Stedman, John Stott and two other brothers. When the subject of another COBE conference was raised, John Stott remarked that he will be 70 years old in 1990. That brought a teasing response from Ray, and I enjoyed their bantering back and forth. But as I listened, I could not help but thank God for the two faithful shepherds, John and Ray, who have been ministering so faithfully for many years in London and Palo Alto respectively. Not once had they lowered their sails, not once had they shrank from declaring the whole purpose of God, to the flock who God had given them.

Neither did Paul. That is why he felt secure in his heart as he spoke to these elders. He had put on the breastplate of righteousness and thus was guarded by Christ. Although Satan had tried through all manners and means to discourage and defeat him in Ephesus, he had never let his sails down. Because he had found his security in Christ, the apostle now feels secure in placing these elders in God's care as he himself departs for Jerusalem.

## **II. Secure in God's care, Acts 20:28-32**

"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."

There is a spiritual battle going on for the souls of men and women, boys and girls. The Christian cannot survive unless he puts on the whole armor of God, and that includes the breastplate of righteousness. This armor will enable him to be secure in Christ regardless of the attacks of Satan.

With this in mind, Paul now encourages the Ephesian elders in three areas.

First, says the apostle, "be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock." Here he commands them to pay attention to themselves and to remember that they had been called to be elders by the Holy Spirit. Thus they should seek to develop the qualities of a good shepherd. Their example was Christ, who said, "I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." If they did not guard themselves they were in danger of being swayed by the evil one and then the flock for whom they were responsible would be scattered.

Second, Paul says that they should pay attention to their flock, "among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood." They were responsible to care for and protect God's sheep. As elders, they had been appointed by God not by men, through the Holy Spirit, to be overseers. This word describes their activity among the Body. That activity was to shepherd, lead, tend, feed and protect the flock which had been entrusted to them, all the while understanding that their role was that of undershepherds to the Chief Shepherd, who ultimately was responsible for his flock. They should never fail to remember how valuable the sheep were to God, as he had purchased them with the precious blood

of his own Son. As Peter wrote, "...you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold...but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18,19).

Next, says Paul, the Ephesian elders were to watch out for wolves and perverse teachers. The apostle loved the Ephesians so much he was ready to lay down his life for them. Now that he was leaving, he knew that soon word would get out that he, the strong shepherd, was no longer around. The enemies of Christ would take the opportunity to test his successors to determine how strong they were.

And they would attack the flock in two ways. First, "savage wolves," who were owned and raised by Satan, would begin to circle the flock, seeking to pick off the weak and lame sheep. Jesus said, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt.7:15). Second, "perverse teachers" from among their own group would attack the flock and seek to mislead them. Their sole motive would be to draw disciples of Christ to themselves. Paul may have been thinking of the Judaizers (Acts 15:1), as well as men like Diotrephes (3 John), who some years later would take a high seat and become disobedient to the apostles' authority and teaching. These men would not deny the truth, but rather would seek to twist, distort and water it down, mixing it with error.

"Be on the alert," says Paul (verse 31). They should remain alert because their enemy never slept. The "wolves" were always circling the flock from without, while the "perverse teachers" stirred the minds of the flock from within. What the elders should do was follow Paul's example: "Remember how I consistently admonished you with tears night and day for three years," he says. "You were the focus of my life. Regard your shepherding responsibilities as a life-and-death struggle between you and Satan. And this can only be done in the Lord's strength. Put off the attacks of the evil one by putting on the full armor of God."

Paul then commends the elders to God. He is leaving and must turn them over to the secure hands of the Good Shepherd who had promised to never leave them or forsake them. When I came here to Peninsula Bible Church from Walnut Creek Presbyterian church many years ago, I was forever being tempted to return to my former ministry just to check up and see that things were going well. That is what happens when you become possessive and you feel that God's flock is really yours. But Paul did not do that. He turned the Ephesians over to God's care, fully convinced that God was adequate to meet their needs.

So the apostle commends them "to the word of His grace." The word of God had taught them about the grace of God, that grace by which they had been saved when they placed their faith in Jesus Christ. And that word would perform a two-fold function among them: it would "build them up," mature them in Christ; and it would give them "the inheritance among those who are sanctified," says Paul.

When I was in Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia years ago, I heard that great pastor and shepherd Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse say one Sunday that he had been their pastor since he was 25 years old, but now it was time for him to step back while another pastor succeeded him in his ministry. He asked the congregation to stand so that he could commend us to God and to his word. I remember being very moved as I sat and listened. Dr. Barnhouse knew who he was in Christ, and he knew that his role was that of a shepherd. He was well aware that his flock was not his property but that the sheep in that place belonged to God, the Good Shepherd. Dr. Barnhouse died in 1960, at 65 years of age.

Paul was secure in Christ's message and he was secure in God's care for him, for the shepherds in Ephesus, and for the flock of God there. His security in the midst of the spiritual battle was not due to his own strength, but rather was due to the fact that he had put on the "breastplate of righteousness." He knew that his relationship with God was secure because his relationship with Christ was secure. Thus he was encouraged and strengthened regardless of the spiritual nature of the battle. Satan's missiles of doubt, fear and anxiety never reached his heart.

Now, as he prepares to depart, Paul is secure as he recalls his personal dealings with the Ephesian elders.

### **III. Secure in personal integrity, Acts 20:33-38**

"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 every thing 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.'" And 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 should see his face no more. And they were accompanying him to the ship.

The apostle had just returned from visiting the churches in Greece where he had collected offerings for the famine victims in Jerusalem. He knew that the enemy would attack him by spreading the lie that he was in the ministry merely for financial gain. Thus he says three things that hopefully would blunt that charge when it came up.

First, says Paul, he "coveted no man's silver or gold or clothes." Second, during his entire three years among them he made tents so that he could pay his own living expenses, just as he had done in Corinth and Thessalonica. He even paid for the needs of his disciples in this way. And third, he prayed that by his example they would be encouraged to help the weak, remembering the words of Jesus himself, "it is better to give than to receive."

Responding to the apostle's address, the Ephesian elders confirmed everything he had said by their tears of grief at his departure. They kissed him and prayed with him, as they were under the impression that this was their last meeting with him. However, they would see him once more before he died.

The secret of Paul's life, both as a shepherd and a soldier, and what makes him an example for us to follow in our day, was his awareness that he was involved in a spiritual battle. To safeguard himself he had taken care to put on the "breastplate of righteousness" so that the flaming darts of Satan could not penetrate to his heart. Paul was secure in Christ, secure in his message, secure in the power of God to care for his flock, and secure in his own personal integrity. Thus he remained a faithful shepherd of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd of the church.

In closing, I ask you to be faithful to pray for your elders here at Peninsula Bible Church. Pray that we may find our security in Christ by wearing the "breastplate of righteousness." We are daily tempted to quit the ministry and flee to seek our security elsewhere. Pray that Satan's flaming darts will not penetrate. And pray also that we "will not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God," that we will never lower our sails, regardless of the spiritual storms that we face. Pray that we will not act in a way that looks as though you, the Body of Christ, are our possession, not God's, and that we will be secure in the power of the Good Shepherd to watch over and guard you.

And pray too that we will be men of godly integrity, as was Paul in the years he spent among the Ephesians. In our ministry among you we must at times cast down some of the sheep and examine them to see why they are limping. We want to be faithful shepherds, but we want to minister with you and among you, not over you.

---

Catalog No. 4103  
Acts 20:17-36  
Eighteenth Message  
Ron R. Ritchie  
March 20, 1988

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed

to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.