



series: [The Great Adventure](#)
previous message: [Miracles and Magic](#)

formats: [mp3](#)

I COMMEND YOU TO GOD AND HIS WORD

SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE

By Steve Zeisler

The text we're going to study in this message, Acts 20:17-38, has some wonderful instruction on the nature of Christian leadership.

Let me pause for a moment and explain that we're skipping Acts 20:1-16 in this series. It tells an engaging story about a young man named Eutychus who fell asleep during a sermon. (It's always been a favorite of mine, because of my experience putting people to sleep during sermons.) It's also a great description of a home group. That text would be a good one to study if you are considering what God would have for your own home group. But from now on we're going to pick up the pace of our progress through the book of Acts. We're going to study much larger sections at a time and skip over some texts.

Acts 20:17-38 records a message Paul gave at what may have been the first Christian leadership conference. It's something of a graduation speech to elders Paul had trained, to whom he is now passing the torch.

From Miletus, he [Paul] 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, 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.'"

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.

This is a solemn passing of responsibility from one generation of leadership to the next. But there's something beautiful about the scene, isn't there? In their tears, kissing, and embracing we see a tremendous depth of love for one another. Paul says that he doesn't expect to ever to return to Ephesus, a place he had been for three years with people he cared for very much.

Paul was traveling by sea, and he sent word ahead to the elders of the church in Ephesus, thirty miles inland from Miletus, then a coast city (but not in our day, because the river delta has shifted a bit), and asked them to meet him there when the ship came into port. This meeting must have taken place right near the water, perhaps on a beach or dock, because we read that at the end of this meeting that they accompanied him to the ship.

You probably noticed that at the beginning of this speech, Paul talks about himself. He reminds his friends what happened when he was with them previously, the kind of person he was, the passions that drove him, their common experience, where he is going now. It isn't that Paul is self-absorbed. He learned by following the Lord, and he expects his life to be an example for others. Starting in verse 28, though, Paul uses a different approach and gives these elders specific instruction. This verse is probably the heart of the section: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock..."

I won't be able to cover all of what's in this message, but I'm going to pick out some things that I hope will be helpful to us in thinking about the leaders of our church.

Connecting with courage

The first particular I want to pull out is in verse 18. Paul says, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was *with you* the whole time..." He is saying, "Our lives touched one another, both in public and from house to house [in homes]." He presumably stayed in the homes of people in the church. They had meals together, shared life together, held one another when they were hurting, prayed for one another, knew one another.

There is a form of leadership that insists on distance between the superior and the inferior. Directions are spoken from a high tower, and important statements are issued on official stationery. There is little connection between the one who has authority and the people who receive his word. In God's kingdom there is no notion of Christian leadership that is merely authoritarian without relationship. It can't work. Paul was *with* them the whole time. Look at what he highlights in the next phrase: "with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews." He shared his own tears with them. He didn't just leap from mountaintop to mountaintop, invulnerable to weakness or difficulty or struggle. Paul and these men from Ephesus lived their lives together, and they lived them in tears, trials, and struggles.

What does this type of leadership say about Jesus? The opening of the book of Hebrews declares, "God, after he spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets...in these last days has spoken to us in His Son..." It wasn't good enough for God to speak from a distance and write commandments on tablets of stone that said what he was like. In the long run, he had to come himself. Even Jesus struggled in Gethsemane and asked his friends to hold him up in his vulnerability. If God himself makes himself vulnerable and comes near to us, this is also the kind of leadership he intends for the community of his people.

Let's also consider a pair of terms repeated by Paul in his sermon. One is "shrink from," meaning to hesitate or pull back. Verse 20: "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable..." Verse 27: "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." Paul told them everything they needed to hear.

Those who take the mantle of leadership must be courageous.

The other term is “solemnly testify.” In verse 21 Paul says he was “solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Verse 23: “The Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.” In verse 24 he speaks of “the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” The Greek word for “testify” has the ordinary meaning of saying something, but here it has a prefix added to it that gives it intensity: it’s a *solemn* testimony. It’s important. There are truths that are difficult to hear, that require courage to say, and Paul says he treated such things seriously and said them when needed. His teaching ministry was both courageous and serious-minded.

Now, this isn’t to say that everything about the Christian life is serious, that there is no joy. We can and should laugh at ourselves, embrace one another, and delight in life as it’s given to us.

But the message of the gospel is weighty: life and death are serious matters.

Courage is required in a couple of settings, isn’t it? It’s required when you know that opponents of the truth will reject what you’re saying, but you have to say it anyway. But courage is also required in settings where you want to be popular—where you’re meeting with other believers, and you know what they want to hear. Sometimes courage is required of leaders in order for them to say the necessary thing, to challenge hypocrisy.

Our dog Emma loves to be held and have her ears scratched. If you give her even the faintest notion that you might hold her and scratch her ears, she’s there in a flash. But Paul says in 2 Timothy of some in the Christian community, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (2 Timothy 4:3-4.)

One of the debates in the current election season is whether our troops have been sent into battle with everything they need. Is their armor sufficient? Have they been trained well enough? Have they been given the proper supplies?

The apostle uses similar imagery in verses 26-27: “I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink back from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.” He is saying, “I have given you everything you need. I said what needed to be said. And you must do the same.” Faithfulness to Christ is not safe and easy, but we are supplied with all we need.

Staying on course at all costs

Verse 24 has another particular for us to consider. It’s a difficult verse: “I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I might finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus.” Paul was called to follow and serve Jesus, and if it costs him everything, he is willing to pay that price.

Paul is advocating a life of service without reservation for these Ephesian elders, because he himself is living that kind of life of service. The Lord Jesus was the same. He gave up everything for us. It is a high standard: Christian leaders are those who have decided that life itself is not more important than pleasing the One who has called them.

One last observation of a particular, in verse 33: “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.’” The issue of love of money is one that is always in play when men and women are called to leadership in a Christian community. Have the folks who are given the responsibility to lead dealt with the lure of covetousness? It’s a difficult temptation that will

always recur. Further, he advocates a commitment to give to meet the needs of the poor. Jesus insisted on it. Once again we see the heart of Jesus, who refused riches himself, chose what God wanted for him, and taught others to give rather than take for themselves.

Guarding the flock

As I mentioned earlier, verse 28 is really the centerpiece of the text. “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.” Jesus also used the image of a shepherd: “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me...and I lay down My life for the sheep.” (John 10:11-15.)

The flock belongs to God, who purchased it at great price. It is His Spirit who puts people in place to care for the flock. Every now and then I’ll be in a setting with other pastors who will say something like “My church is doing this or that,” or “My church’s plans are such-and-such.” Most of the time the language is innocent, but sometimes they really mean, “It’s *my* church. These people depend on me. I’m in charge. I make things happen. When the church is successful, it’s my success. (And when it struggles, I move on.)” But the clear point here is that the church belongs to the Lord. We serve as under-shepherds to the great Shepherd.

The responsibility of these under-shepherds is to be on the alert. He repeats this in verse 31. They must be careful, pay attention, be on guard. They must be alert for themselves—that’s an important point. Leaders need to have their own spiritual life refreshed. And then they need to be on the alert and watchful for the flock. Sometimes attacks come from outside, from people who hate the faith and make life hard for Christians. Sometimes attacks come from deceivers who grow up in the midst of the flock. Under-shepherds must be watchful night and day.

Christ never diverts his gaze from us. There is no time when he is not attentive and alert, protecting us. What Paul is calling these elders to do is act as their Lord does.

In verse 32 Paul speaks a benediction: “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.” Paul commends these Ephesian elders, as he leaves them, to the living God and to the Scriptures—the word of his grace. If we find ourselves able to love and follow God and hear the words of the Scriptures, we have been given everything we need.

Scripture quotations are taken from New American Standard Bible, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Catalog No. 4776
Acts 20:17-38
36th Message
Steve Zeisler
October 17, 2004



series: [The Great Adventure](#)
previous message: [Miracles and Magic](#)
formats: [mp3](#)

Copyright © 2004 [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.