

Place: Lurgan Baptist 31:1:2012

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

Reading: Acts 20:17-38

31. A FAREWELL ADDRESS

Miletus was a city of considerable size and importance. It was located on the south shore of the Latonian Gulf, at the mouth of the Maeander River, Ephesus was about thirty miles away. Paul now summoned the Ephesian elders to meet him. This would be his farewell address to them. As they took their leave from one another it was painful.

“Sorrowing most of the all for the words which he spake that they should see has face no more.” Most of us have known such partings. They tug at the heart. The word used for “*sorrowing*,” here is only used by Luke and only on two other occasions. The first time it is used is in connection with Mary and Joseph. When they found the young Jesus in the Temple with the doctors having searched diligently for him for three days Mary said, *“Thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.”* (Lk 2:48) Can you imagine the anguish they suffered thinking that through their neglect and carelessness they had lost Him? The word is also used in the story of the rich man in hell.

Do you recall that he cried to Abraham for relief, *“I am tormented in this flame,”* he said. (Lk 16:24) Now that is the word Luke uses to describe the sorrow of the Ephesian

elders. Their sense of loss was overwhelming. Never to see the beloved apostle again, the very thought wrung their hearts. Moreover, Paul knew he would never see them again. I mean these men were especially dear to Paul’s heart. He was their spiritual father and the founder of the local church he served. For three years he had nurtured and taught them enduring persecution from the Jews and a riot caused by the Gentiles. They had grown to spiritual maturity under Paul’s ministry and he had released them to the oversight of the Ephesian congregation. Paul reminds that they are “*overseers*.” The word is episkopos sometimes translated “*bishop*,” in the King James Version. Did you notice that these same people are called “*elders*,” in (20:17)? The word does not envision an Episcopal hierarchy such as grew up in later years in the church. The leaders of the Ephesian church are called “*elders*,” “*bishops*,” and “*shepherds* or “*pastors*.” All these terms are used to refer to those in the highest place of spiritual leadership in the church.

Now can you picture this farewell scene? I mean this is one of the great farewells of Scripture, equal to, if not surpassing those of Jacob and his sons, Moses and Joshua and even Jonathan and David. We can draw upon our own experiences to grasp the pathos of this goodbye. Pulling up roots to move to a new town, driving around the street or avenue to wave one last farewell, sitting at the edge of a bed to say goodbye to a precious loved one. Good-byes are not only a common part of our experience they occupy prominent places in history. When General Douglas McArthur was departing from the Philippines he wrote,

“ On the dock I could see the men staring at me. I had lost 25 pounds living on the same diet as the soldiers and I must have looked gaunt and ghastly standing there in my old war stained clothes, no bemedaled commander of inspiring presence. Darkness had now fallen and the waters were beginning to ripple from the faint night breeze. The enemy firing had ceased and a muttering silence had fallen. It was as though the dead were passing by the stench of destruction. The smell of filth thickened the night air. I raised my cap in farewell salute, and I could feel my face go white, feel a sudden convulsive twitch in the muscles of my face. I heard someone ask, ‘ What’s his chance Serg of getting through ?’ and thee gruff reply, ‘ Dunno. He’s lucky maybe one in five.’ I stepped aboard, PT-41. ‘ You may cast off, Buck,’ I said ‘ When you are ready.’”

That was General McArthur farewell to the Philippines. This is Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders. It’s like a group of soldiers still soiled by the blood and dust of war drawing around their revered general for some final wisdom. Now if you look closely at this farewell address you’ll notice that Paul looks in four different directions. Paul begins with,

(1) A LOOK BACKWARD

Did you notice that Paul calls attention to his life in their midst “ *from the first day,*” (20:18) and for “ *the space of three years.*” (20:31) His life had been an open book and he now challenged the Ephesian elders to examine it.

Paul says, “ *You know the record. I was with you for three years. You watched me. You observed my manner. You saw how I conducted myself. I was with you at all seasons.*” You see, as Paul’s looks backward he calls witness to

(a) HIS MANNER:

Look if you will at (20:18-19) You see, Paul viewed the ministry primarily, as serving the Lord. Why he commonly referred to himself as “ *a servant or bond servant of Jesus Christ.*” (Rom 1:1 Gal 1:10) It was the Lord Paul sought to please not men. Do you recall that in the midst of a raging storm at sea he testified of that devotion to serve his Lord by telling the others on board “ *For there stood by me this night the angel of God whose I am and whom I serve.*” (Acts 27:24) To the Galatian believers he wrote, “ *For do I now persuade men or God ?*

Or do I seek to please men ? for if I yet pleased men I should not be the servant of Christ.” (Gal 1:10) Now all of us who are believers are called to serve the Lord. Indeed everything believers do is service to Him. (1 Cor 10:31) It means a preacher does not serve the desires and will of the congregation, or even the leaders of the church but God. It means an employee does not serve an employer but God. (Eph 6:5-7) As Paul said to the Colossian believers, “ *For ye serve the Lord Christ.*” (Col 3:24) Now did you notice here how Paul served the Lord ?

1. Paul served the Lord Humbly:

Look at (20:19) I mean what college teaches humility courses ? Someone has said that “ *humility is the highest degree of the hardest grace.*” My despite his accomplishments and position Paul was a humble man. “ *Who then is Paul and who is Apollos ?*” he asked the factious Corinthians, “ *but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man.*”

(1 Cor 3:5) You see, it's not important who you and I are, but it's important who Christ is. Just the moment you think you are somebody God will show you, you're a nobody. I heard about a flea that marched across a bridge with an elephant. When they got across the flea said to the elephant, “ *Did you feel her move when you and I walked over.*” Ambrose the fourth century bishop of Milan was one of the most noted leaders of the early church. It was under his ministry that Augustine was saved. Ambrose had been the governor of the Roman province that included the city of Milan. When that city's bishop died the people met in the cathedral to elect a new bishop. As governor Ambrose rose to speak to the crowds someone shouted out, “ *Ambrose for bishop.*” Others in the crowd echoed his shout.

To his surprise and dismay Ambrose was elected bishop. He fled and tried unsuccessfully to hide but was finally persuaded that his appointment was God's will. His first act as Bishop was to give away his wealth to the poor.

2. Paul served the Lord Passionately:

“ *With many tears,*” (20:19) His zeal for the Lord caused him to be grieved and pained when the Lord was

dishonoured by unbelievers and believers. Paul was like his son Timothy. Paul said he remembered Timothy's tears. (2 Tim 1:3) I suppose Timothy saw Paul's tears. Do you recall the Saviour wept ? *Christ wept once at a Grave, once at a Gate, and once in a Garden. Christ wept because of sins bitterness, sins blindness and sin's burden.* Paul wept. He wept over,

Unconverted Souls: Look at (20:31) A young man was giving out tracts one day and he handed one to a man called Mr. Boch. Boch tore it up and threw it on the ground. Then he looked and he saw the young man who had given him the tract standing crying. Boch picked up the pieces of the tract and put them together, read it and was wonderfully saved. My Christ wept over the city of Jerusalem. Paul wept over the city of Ephesus. Who weeps over the city of Craigavon ? When was the last time your heart was really broken about a wayward child and you wept before the Lord ?

Unspiritual Saints: He cried over weak, sinning saints. To such believers, at Corinth he wrote, “ *For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears.*” (2 Cor 2:4)

Ungodly Servants: Preachers who were false. (20:29-31) To the Philippians he wrote, “ *For many walk of whom, I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ.*” (Phil 3:18) Thank God the tears of a servant of God are not in vain. For the Psalmist says, “ *He that goeth forth and weepeth bearing precious seed shall doubtless come again with*

rejoicing bringing his sheaves with him.” (Ps 126:6) My do we know anything about serving the Lord humbly and passionately ?

3. Paul served the Lord Continually:

“ *At all seasons with many temptations which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews.*” (20:19) The Jews had been the plague of his life, persecuting him incessantly, but opposition did not hinder him, praise did not harm him. Paul just kept on keeping on. You know that some Christians go up like a rocket and come down like a rock but not Paul he went steadily on. Now as you look at the manner of your service is it like Paul’s ?

(b) HIS METHOD:

Methods change along the way but there are certain methods embedded in Scripture that must be applied to every generation. For instance look at (20:20) What a testimony this man. Paul testified by

1. His Life:

“ *I have showed you,*” Paul is saying, “ *I have showed you by personal example. I lived the life in front of you.*” My the N.T teaches that the heart of leadership is example. Do you recall Christ’s words to His disciples ? “ *For I have given you an example that ye should do as I have done to you.*” (Jn 13:15) Peter exhorted his fellow elders to “ *be examples to the flock.*” (1 Pet 5:3) Elders,

are we example to the flock ? Parents are we examples to our children ? Employees are you examples to your employers ?

2. His Lips:

“ *And have taught you publicly,*” Indeed he says, “ *I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you.*” The expression “ *Kept back,*” comes from Luke’s medical vocabulary. It’s a word that describes withholding food from patients. Paul had never done that. Paul says, “ *I want you to know that when I came to the city of Ephesus. I spread a full table. I put the whole food of the Word of God on the table,.*” Now that’s what I try to do. I try to spread a good full table for you when you come. I don’t walk up here unprepared. Its takes me many hours to get some fresh bread out of heavens oven for you.

3. His Labour:

“ *And from house to house,*” (20:20) He taught publicly first in the synagogue and then in the school of Tyrannus. Paul taught privately going from door to door, from house to house. I tell you there was not a house in Ephesus that Paul had not visited. His method was very simple, go where the people are, do not expect them to come to you. “ *And from house to house,*” my is this not where we are failing as a church ? Have we lost the vision of door to door evangelism ? Sure, we pray, “ Lord bring them in ?” but is that not an insult to the Lord ? Brethren, what are we doing to reach the lost in Lurgan with the gospel ? Now look as Paul looks backward he calls witness to his

(a) (b)

(c) HIS MESSAGE:

Look if you will at (20:21) Why those are the two sides of the one coin called conversion. Repentance is a turning from, faith is a turning to Christ. My Paul's method of visitation was not just to leave a cheery greeting and invite folk to church. His purpose was to confront people with the claims of Christ, with the need for repentance and faith. So much then for (1)

(2) A LOOK FORWARD

Now Paul looks to the future and speaks about,

(a) HIS GRIM PROSPECTS:

What he terms in (20:24) “ *These things*,” you see, the Lord had not promised Paul health and wealth, rather “ *bonds and afflictions*.” Paul often speaks about “ *these things*.” In the very chapter the prophet Agabus speaks of the persecution that Paul was going to face and Luke says “ *And when we heard these things*,” (21:12) When writing to the Philippian believers Paul says, “ *But I would ye should understand brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel*.” (Phil 1:12) In his second letter to the church at Corinth in (Ch 11) we have a record of his afflictions “ *these things*.” Was this not why Paul was chosen ? Do you recall what the Lord said to Ananias ? “ *For I will show him how great things he must*

suffer for my name's sake.” (9:16) My Paul suffered from friends (2 Tim 4:16) Paul suffered from enemies (16:24) Paul suffered from the Devil. (2 Cor 12:7) I mean what do you think Paul would said if you had said to him, “ *Paul, why are you suffering, does the gospel not promise you to be healthy and wealthy ?*” Thankfully over against his grim prospects, there was,

(b) HIS GODLY PERSPECTIVE:

“ *But none of these things move me*,” (20:24) Only one thing mattered to Paul, to finish the work the Lord had given him to do. In the very next chapter he says, “ *What mean ye to weep and to break my heart for I am ready not to bound only but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus*.” (21:13) What a man. His commitment to Christ transcended his concern for self. Back in the 1950s five men decided they would take the gospel to the Auca Indians in Ecuador, South America. One of them was Jim Elliot, whose wife Elisabeth is a well known women's speaker today. Her husband, Jim, and 4 other men believed God wanted them to reach this remote Auca tribe, known as the meanest savages on earth. They were a brutal, murderous tribe.

The men flew over their village, and found a beach that ran alongside a river where they lived. They decided to fly low, dropping gifts and food to the Indians. This they did for several days, and the villagers would run out and retrieve the things dropped and disappear back into the jungle. Then they decided to land on that beach and make contact. The people came out of the jungle slowly to see

these white men, and at first it looked like they had made friends, but then men jumped out with spears and turned on these 5 missionaries, and slaughtered them. When Jim Elliott was preparing to go, people called him a fool. They said, God has given you a brain, so use it. He replied, “**no man is a fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.**” There may be times where serving God will call on us to give up something... but it’s something we can’t keep anyway. One second after death, nothing we’ve accumulated will matter anyway. James Calvert was a young pioneer missionary to the cannibals of the Fiji Islands. On route to those islands the Captain of the ship, a humane man tried to dissuade finally crying in desperation, “*You will lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go among such savages.*” Calvert calmly replied, “**We died before we came.**”

My is it your desire to finish the work that God has given you to do no matter what the cost ? Do you recall how Paul finished ? Writing to young Timothy as his death drew near he said, “*I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.*” (2 Tim 4:7) And after Paul had paid the ultimate sacrifice for his loyal service to Jesus Christ he no doubt heard from His beloved Master the words, “*Well done, good and faithful servant enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.*” (Matt 25:21) (1) (2)

(3) A LOOK INWARD

Do you see the contrast between (20:22) and (20:25) ? In (20:22) Paul says “*not knowing,*” but in (20:25) he

says, “*I know,*” what did Paul know ? That these Ephesian elders, would see his face no more. And in light of that Paul speaks of,

(a) A PAST DEVOTION:

Look at what he says in (20:26-27) Paul says, “*I am free from the misery of a guilty conscience. Nobody’s blood is on my hands.*” Is this not reminiscent of God’s Word to Ezekiel ? Have a look at (Ezek 33:7-9) My have we been faithful in declaring the whole counsel of God ? Are we pure from the blood of all men ? What a sobering word for pastors, evangelists, elders, Bible teachers, Sunday School teachers, soul winners, missionaries and Christian workers. How many of us can make such a statement ? I mean are we not only teaching the church but are we evangelizing the lost ? How can we be so careless about the lost, so complacent about the spiritual condition of thousands all around us ? My how can we eat, drink and be merry with family and friends, neighbours and workmates, contacts and acquaintances ? How can we have such a careless attitude to those still outside of Christ ? Paul couldn’t. That’s why he could say, “*I am pure from the blood of all men.*” Are you ? But notice Paul comes from (a) to,

(b) A PRESENT DUTY:

Look if you will at (20:28) Notice there are two observations here.

1. Personal Heeding:

“ *Take heed therefore unto yourselves,*” or “ *be on guard for yourselves.*” You see, the first priority for anyone involved in spiritual leadership is his own relationship with the Lord. Do you recall Paul says the same thing to Timothy his son in the faith who became the pastor of the Ephesian church ? He says, Timothy “ *Take heed unto thyself,*” (1 Tim 4:16) Paul speaks to Timothy about being a “ *vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the master’s use.*” (2 Tim 2:21) My effective ministry is not mere outward activity, it is the overflow of a rich, deep relationship with God. John Owen says this,

A minister may fill his pews, his communion roll, the mouths of the public, but what that minister is on his knees before God Almighty, that he is and no more.

Was it not Robert Murray McCheyne who said, “ *A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hands of Almighty God. It is not great talent that God blesses but great likeness to Jesus Christ.*” Let me ask the leadership of this church. Are we an example in personal holiness ? Is our walk with God pure ? Are we right with God ourselves ?

2. Spiritual Feeding:

Now will you notice,

The Company Here:

“ *the flock, the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood.*” The word means “ *little flock,*”

(Lk 12:32) God’s people in the world are indeed a little flock defenseless and despised by the world’s great but they are infinitely precious to God for the ultimate price was paid for it when Christ purchased it with his own blood.

The Authority Here:

“ *Over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers,*” Who makes elders ? The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit sovereignly raises up overseers. Elders are not chosen by popular vote. A man does not push himself into the position of an elder. Wealth and social position, business acumen, natural talent and worldly success do not equip a man for the work of an elder. Only the Spirit of God can qualify and call a man to that work.

The Plurality Here:

“ *Overseers,*” or they are called “ *elders,*” in (20:17)

The Responsibility Here:

John Philips says “ *it is easier to run a multi-national corporation than it is to shepherd God’s little flock.*” Now what is the main responsibility of an overseer ? “ *To feed the church of God.*” The word (*poimaino*) literally means to tend as a shepherd. It occurs 11 times in the New Testament, it is translated “ *feed,*” seven times and “ *rule,*” four times. The whole idea of an “ *elder, bishop, overseer, pastor,*” is comprehended in the word “ *shepherd.*” A shepherd pictures for us the concern and

compassion of a man whose life is devoted to the flock. Listen, a shepherd knows the flock, leads the flock, feeds the flock, guards the flock, gathers the flock. Brethren as elders, what do we know of all this ? I mean this is our responsibility. Do you realise that someday you and I will give an account to the Lord for how we led this flock in Lurgan ? (Heb 13:17) Paul speaks here of (a) (b)

(c) A FUTURE DANGER:

1. There was a Danger from Without:

Look at (20:29) This stresses the extreme danger false teachers pose to the church. Indeed according to (Rev Ch 2) they did come to the flock at Ephesus and attack it.

2. There was a Danger from Within:

Look if you will at (20:30) The word “ *perverse*,” means to “ *twist or distort*.” You see, the most dangerous attack would come from within. Its shocking to realise that more than one false prophet got his or her start within the church family. (1 Jn 2:18-19) This is why Paul says to the elders “ *Therefore watch and remember*,” (20:31) My as leaders of the church are you wide awake to what is happening in Christendom ? Do you know what trends are taking place ? What cults are on the move ? What false teachings that are abroad ? You need to know if you are going to guard the flock. I mean isn't so easy to want scholarship in the pulpit, to want successful men on the leadership, to want size in the church that Biblical

standards and principles are simply set aside. “ *Watch*,” says Paul. “ *Don't fall asleep*.” For he says, “ *I ceased not to warn every one night an day with tears*.” I mean if they forgot his words perhaps they would remember his tears. My this is what it means to be a pastor, a shepherd, an elder. It is not a matter of power and position, it is a matter of feeling compassion and care and concern coupled with a life of spirituality and a thorough knowledge of the Word of God. Now as a leader, how do you feel when you put yourself alongside Paul ? Do you share his concern, his care, his compassion for the flock ? Are you a true shepherd of God's people ? So there's (1) (2) (3)

(4) A LOOK UPWARD

For as Paul leaves these Ephesian elders he commends them “ *to God and the Word of His grace*,” thus pointing them to,

(a) THE SOURCE OF POWER:

You see, if an under-shepherd is to feed and protect his flock, he must be a student of the Scriptures and a man of prayer. Do you recall that this was the priority stated in (6:4) “ *But we will give ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word*.” They did not say, “ *We will give ourselves to visitation and counseling*,” needful though that is. They did not say “ *we will give ourselves to committee's and discussion*,” helpful though that can be. They did not say, “ *We will give ourselves to singing, to gospel concerts*,” inspiring though that may be. They said “ *But we will give ourselves to prayer and to the ministry*

of the word.” Why because these are God’s tools for ministry. The Word gives enlightenment prayer gives enablement. When we read the Word our faith is increased because faith comes through the Word. Then we pray and God answers because our praying is guided by the Word of God. Had **Moses** not this ministry ? Moses met God on the mount and interceded for Israel, then came down and taught them the Word that God had given him.

(Ex 32:31 33:5) Had **Samuel** not this ministry ? Do you recall his response when the people requested his prayers ? “ *God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you but I will teach you the good and right way.*” (1 Sam 12:23) Had **Daniel** not this ministry ? Daniel studied the Scriptures and learned God’s plan for the Jewish nation, and then he turned to prayer and asked God to forgive his people and work on their behalf. (Dan 9:3) “ *But we Word.*” Is this not the source of power ? Why is it then that we don’t put the same effort into prayer and the Word as we put into other things ?

(b) THE SECRET OF PROGRESS:

For look at (20:33-34) Here was Paul’s practice among them. To give of himself to them, instead of taking from them. True ministry involves giving not getting. It means following the example of the Lord Jesus who said, “ *It is more blessed to give than to receive.*” (20:35) Paul give himself to the Lord. Paul give himself to the ministry of the Word. Paul give himself to prayer. Paul give himself to God’s people. He was free from self interest. And a truly God honouring ministry will not focus on getting but on

giving. Now this does not mean that the servants of God should not be remunerated. That would be a violation of Scripture. It does mean however, that “ *Ye cannot serve God and mammon.*” (Matt 6:24) Did you know that there are always three great temptations facing spiritual leaders ? This is why you need to pray diligently for your pastors. Do you know what they are ? Girls, Glory, and Gold. Did you notice that this wonderful chapter ends with,

(c) THE SORROW OF PARTING:

Look at how it closes. (20:36-38) Most of us have known such partings. They tug at the heart. Paul had long since won their hearts. Those who lead us to Christ and minister to our spiritual needs always have a special place in our hearts. Paul sailed off to keep giving his life to Christ for he realized that there was a job still to be done. ***What an example he is in how we should approach life and ministry.*** He was successful, because his life was right with God, he made it his priority to shepherd the flock, he gave himself to prayer and the ministry of the Word, and he was totally free of self interest. As a leader, as a shepherd, as a believer, will you seek to emulate him ?

*I thank thee Lord for using me for Thee to work and speak
However, trembling is the hand the voice however weak
O honor, higher, truer far than earthly fame could bring
Thus to be used in service blest, for such a glorious King*

