

## Acts 20:13-38 - Ephesian Farewell

At work, how many of you have had “Annual Reports” or “Annual Reviews” whereby the boss gives an assessment on how you have performed against your job description or targets set for you? Your work may not have needed those reports. I had these reviews when I worked for the government. And in later years we employees had to ourselves, as part of the report, give an account of the work we have done over the past year.

In our Bible reading from the Acts, the early church leader and missionary, Paul, was doing something like this – he was reviewing the work he did while he was in Ephesus.

He was now at the end of his third missionary journey. V16 says he called, summoned, the elders of the church in Ephesus to him at Miletus, to address them. Elders in the New Testament are leaders in local churches who have the main responsibility from God to preach God’s word and to lead the church congregation.

This church in Ephesus was formed when Paul had earlier on this journey spent three years there telling people about Jesus. Chapter 19 tells us what happened. There were miracles, sick people miraculously cured, and others delivered from evil spirits, by God’s power. Many believed in Jesus through Paul’s preaching and confessed their sins. Others turned away from occult practices, burning their literature publicly. And there was a riot! Exciting stuff!

Now Paul is reviewing with the church leaders the work he did when he spent those 3 years in Ephesus. He also talks about his future. He expected to never see these friends and leaders again (v25). This is his farewell to the Ephesians. So we can expect him to highlight what is most important!

We’ll see Paul highlighted that he preached the Christian message about Jesus. We’ll also see this message is worth suffering for, that we must beware of distortions of this message, and it’s a message to be lived out.

### **First, Paul preached the message about Jesus**

Did you notice the repeated use of words showing this was Paul’s work?

v20: “I have not hesitated to *preach* anything helpful to you but have *taught* you publicly and from house to house.”

V21: “I have *declared* ....”

V24: the task of *testifying* to the good news of God’s grace.”

V25: I have gone about *preaching* the Kingdom (God’s Kingdom means when God governs our lives)

V27: I have not hesitated to *proclaim* to you the whole will of God. That is, all the Bible says about us and the good news of Jesus.

That's how Paul served God. That's the work he did for the Ephesians. He preached, taught, declared, testified and proclaimed the Christian message about Christ. It's this message and Paul's proclamation of it is the main theme in this passage.

I think it's worth making this point because it seems preaching and telling others about Jesus is sometimes in our culture regarded as sort of out of fashion. Some churches like to help people in other ways. Have you heard what Francis of Assisi is sometimes quoted as saying? "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words". This seems to imply the gospel, the "gospel" means the good news about Jesus, the Christian message, can be preached without words! That's not how Paul preached it!!

Now let's be clear that it *is* important that our lives should show our faith. Maybe that's what Francis of Assisi meant. And there's a particular way to do that mentioned in our final point. And when we show something of Jesus' love for others, this can draw people to want to know more. But then the good news of Jesus needs to be explained to them.

And Paul does not refer to the miracles and healings we've noted that Acts 19 says God did in Ephesus. Rather, he emphasised his proclaiming God's word.

What is it about Jesus Paul preached? In v26, Paul claims that because he proclaimed this truth to the Ephesians, he was innocent of their blood. Why is the message so important? And such good news?

Twice in this passage, in vs24 and 32, Paul calls his message the good news or word of *God's grace*. Grace means God's favour we don't deserve. This is because God rescues us from the eternity we deserve in hell, and instead gives an eternal future with God and knowing his love forever we don't deserve. This rescue is possible because when Jesus died on the cross, He bore God's wrath for our sin so that we'll never have to suffer it. This message changes peoples' eternal destinies!

So in v32, Paul can commit his hearers to God and the word of His grace, "which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified". This means, if we're trusting in Christ, God by His grace will sustain us in our faith, keeping us with Him, and in due time lead us to our heavenly home God has promised us.

And Paul summed up what he preached in v21. It describes our response whereby we come into God's grace to enjoy His everlasting love.

"I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."

This means God commands everyone to turn from living independently from Him and from all known sin and rebellion against God to trust in Jesus as our personal Lord and Saviour, with Him in charge of our lives.

So, Paul helped the Ephesians by proclaiming to them the message of God's grace. And that people must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. It's proclaiming this message that is the task of the church. We're today thanking God for harvest, His provision of our food. But another harvest is the harvest of people coming to trust in Jesus. And it's by

the proclamation of this message about Christ that people come to faith, that this harvest is gathered in.

### **Second, the message is worth suffering, making sacrifices for**

Annual reviews also set objectives our employer wants us to achieve in the future. In v23 Paul talks about his future. He says the Holy Spirit had been warning him he faces prison and hardship.

Previously in v19 he recounted his past suffering: “I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents”. “Great humility” may mean “humiliations”.

But what was Paul’s attitude to his suffering for Christ?

“However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.”

Compared to telling others the eternal destiny-changing good news of God’s grace, even Paul’s life was worth nothing to him. He wants to go on telling people this good news even if it means prison and hardships. “Hardships” probably means physical hardships.

Just think for a moment about how challenging this is, perhaps especially in our culture of self-preservation demanding a life of comfort and happiness. We don’t currently in this country face imprisonment and death for proclaiming the Christian message, like Paul did.

But aren’t people willing to make sacrifices for the sake of something they’re really motivated about? Farmers work hard to get the harvest. In v24 Paul likens completing the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace to finishing a race, or the course set for him by God. Athletes and runners are motivated to finish and win, and employees work to meet the objectives set them, maybe with the hope of a bigger pay rise. George has walked the whole of the Pennine Way! Just the thought of that makes me feel tired!

And maybe the more we appreciate that God has rescued us from the eternity we deserve to instead enjoy an eternity we don’t deserve, the more we’ll want to make sacrifices for this good news of God’s grace. We’ll want others to hear it. Perhaps we’ll be more prepared to face real life-changing circumstances or changes in our social or family or financial situations to help bring the good news to others.

I myself find this challenging! I do like my creature comforts! And I have been asking myself lately, is the mission of telling people the good news of God’s grace more important to me than my comforts, or not suffering hostility if I tell them about Jesus? Or, am I prepared to ‘suffer’ by getting up earlier on some mornings to have a better prayer time for the eternal rescue of others? Paul was prepared to face *real* physical suffering and even death for the sake of telling others the good news of God’s amazing grace in Jesus.

### **Third, beware of distortions of the message**

V29&30 say the Ephesian church is in danger from savage wolves! “Savage wolves” is strong language! Paul uses it to describe men who’d distort the truth he proclaimed and cause divisions in the church by drawing Christians away after them. These men will even include some associated with the church.

What could the distortions be? Letters Paul later wrote to a young leader in Ephesus, Timothy, may indicate (e.g. 1 Tim 1v3-11, 1 Tim 4:1-3, 2 Tim 3:1-9) the false teaching Paul foresaw was we needed something in addition to faith in Christ to be acceptable to God or to find God, to get to heaven, or to know God properly. Maybe some special knowledge, or a spiritual experience, or a ritual, or something of our own effort. Or abstaining from some good things that the Bible doesn’t forbid and actually God has given us to enjoy. Such distortions damage our trust, confidence and joy in Christ. Why? Because if getting to heaven and knowing God’s love were dependent on our own effort or performance or good works, we’d never really be sure we’ve done good enough.

In contrast, the good news of God’s grace gives us confidence and sure hope: that *God* promises if we truly believe in Christ, He will sustain us in our faith keeping us with Him and in due time, lead us to our heavenly home.

And it’s in the context of the danger of distortions of the truth and division in the church that in v28 Paul tells the church leaders to keep watch over themselves and all the flock, and to shepherd the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

A shepherd wants to protect his flock from savage wolves which could tear them apart. If we’re Christians, Christ purchased us with His own blood, the highest price possible. We’re *that* loved by God, that precious to Him. So He wants to protect us from unhelpful teaching that damages our trust and joy in Christ and divides the church. He does this mainly through church leaders equipped by the Holy Spirit and who shepherd us by teaching Biblical truth, the word of His grace.

While we don’t all have leadership responsibilities, we can pray for and be supportive of our leaders, including Dave, Dan and George who have the main responsibility among us here at St Nicholas for teaching God’s word and guarding the flock. And we can pray for those such as bishops who have responsibility wider than the local church.

So, Paul proclaimed the Christian message, he considered the message worth suffering and making sacrifices for, and we’re to beware of distortions to that message.

And now as we close,

### **Forth, it’s a message to be lived out**

While good deeds and our efforts never earn us a place in heaven, it is also true that genuine Christian faith *results* in good deeds and changed lives.

In vs33-35 Paul gives us one particular example of how he lived out his faith in a very practical way. He worked with his hands to supply his own needs. And this also set an example of working hard to help the weak. The weak would be the economically weak in the church, perhaps those who were unable to work to earn their own living.

Paul quotes Jesus Himself said, “It’s more blessed to give than to receive”. This isn’t an exact quote from anything Jesus is recorded in the Bible as saying, but a number of times He commanded giving and generosity to the poor. (For example Luke 11:41, 6:30, 38; 12:33 and 18:22). A small illustration of this is what we’ve done today at harvest, bringing items from all the food God has given us, to share with those who have less than we have.

I think a sign of genuine maturing Christian faith is a desire to use our resources, however little we may have, to support ourselves and also to give to others.

So we have the message of God’s grace to spread, which is a message worth suffering and making sacrifices for, it’s a message that must never be distorted, and a message to be lived out in giving to those of us who are unable to support themselves.

Let’s pray.