

Derek French:

As we ended our last programme, Gerard Chrispin reminded us that, although Paul never visited Ephesus again, he had most certainly not forgotten them.

On his way back to Jerusalem, Paul landed at Miletus for a short while. From there he called the elders of the Ephesian church to come and meet with him one more time, and this they did. Paul's purpose was to strengthen these men in their leadership of the church by sharing something of the way he had served the Lord during his own time in Ephesus and giving them some very important teaching.

His approach was similar to what he later urged Timothy to do as he also ministered to the Ephesian church. When Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy he gave him this instruction that would ensure the faithful teaching of God's Word for the generations to come, right up to the time when Jesus will return to earth. This is what he wrote: *'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.'*

Having a godly, faithful, reliable leadership in any church is essential if that church is to flourish, and at the most, in the work of such leaders, is their faithfulness in teaching the scriptures. It has always proved to be that when the leadership of a church begins to reduce its faithfulness to scripture or worse, to deny any of its teaching, that church suffers immensely. Its membership is not given a faithful, spiritual diet of God's Word and finds its faith weakens, its numbers decrease and ultimately, if there is no return to the faithful teaching of the Bible, churches often die out completely. Such an occurrence is disastrous, both for the members of the church and for its evangelistic influence in the area where it is situated.

And Paul was keenly aware of such dangers. And so, as he speaks with the Ephesian elders, he carefully counsels them to be both faithful to the Bible, because it is God's infallible Word, and to do good evangelistic effort, taking the gospel of Christ and him crucified to the people around it.

Today we'll concentrate on the earlier part of his conversation with the godly men from Ephesus, and you'll notice how Paul was able to call on the testimony of his own work among them. He doesn't do so in order to parade himself and boast about how wonderful he was. No, Paul was a very humble servant of the Lord but nonetheless he was able to set before them a wonderful example of total commitment to the work of the gospel. Unlike some false teachers, he did not teach one thing and practise something entirely different. With Paul there was a wonderful consistency and a lovely, humble, godly testimony that only served to give all the glory to God and added weight to his exhortations.

Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin have joined us again and Phillippa will read Acts chapter 20, verses 17 to 38 and then Gerard will comment on the first part of that reading.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them: "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*

*"And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, 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 have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.*

*"So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who*

*were with me. I have shown you in every way, by labouring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He 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. Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.'*

Gerard Chrispin:

Paul knows that for a church to stand and grow it must be led by its own converted and committed leadership team of spiritually mature equals who trust fully in God's word. They are responsible to God for the autonomous running of the church. They are known as 'elders', or 'overseers'. In the Bible a 'bishop' is precisely the same man as an elder or overseer in the local church leadership team.

In the biblical sense a 'bishop' is not someone who wears special clothes, carries a shepherd's crook, lives in a palace and has great individual authority over many people and many churches. That thinking comes from the way that some churches have developed historically rather than from the New Testament. But in reality a traditional 'bishop' with his special clothes, shepherd's crook, and palatial home is sometimes a soundly converted and very committed man of God but not because he carries the title, 'bishop'. Titles cannot save guilty sinners: only personal faith in Christ can do that.

The apostle's ongoing concern is to set up elders in all the churches. He wants them to be able to teach others and to teach others to teach others. With God's help, Paul builds teachers of teachers, to try to ensure that the church's biblical and doctrinal soundness, spiritual approach, biblical teaching and evangelism, and righteous conduct will be ongoing long after he has gone to glory. That is why at other times he leaves Titus in Crete and Timothy in Ephesus to appoint elders, and guides them clearly as to the character and spiritual qualifications required for each elder.

Paul needs to meet with the leaders of the Ephesian church. He wants to share with them some important and urgent teaching. We still need to heed this teaching today. Paul does not call for a full church meeting. Instead, he sends to Ephesus to call 'for the elders of the church' to meet him at Miletus, the last place reached in his travels towards Jerusalem. He will never meet again with this trusted group of dedicated disciples who teach and care for the Ephesian church. He wants God to stir the minds and hearts of these men who love Christ and serve Him faithfully, to try to ensure that the church survives and prospers spiritually in their hands. What is the message from his heart to theirs?

The elders arrive. Paul speaks frankly with them. He does not boast of his achievements, but he can point to his testimony as an example for them to follow. He reminds them of his transparency among them. He has served God well as an apostle, a gospel preacher, a teacher of God's word, a church planter and a wise counsellor. He has walked in loving integrity, faithful and humble service, and uncompromising discipleship. The Jews' desire to kill him has brought him 'tears and trials'. Yet he has poured himself out to help teach God's word to Jews, Greeks and church members 'publicly and from house to house'. He insists that both Jews and Greeks must repent and trust in Jesus Christ.

He tells the elders that he is bound for Jerusalem knowing only that he will experience 'chains and tribulations' in each city. The Holy Spirit has made this known to His apostle as he walks closely with God. Yet, he is unmoved by this. He holds his life loosely for the gospel and for the cause of Christ. His only ambition on earth is to finish his life's race joyfully while working to the end for the Lord Jesus Christ 'to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.'

Derek French:

We must wait until next time before we can consider those two important points that Paul wants the Ephesian elders to learn, but the great challenge of what we have heard about Paul in today's programme is that his life clearly was a truly wonderful example for these Ephesian elders to imitate.

And that in turn becomes a challenge to us in two ways. First, are we anywhere near the high standard of humble service for Christ that Paul rendered to the Lord in his work at Ephesus? And second, are we able to help others to serve the Lord faithfully because we have done so ourselves and have set before them a godly example to follow?

We sometimes fail to appreciate just how much our lives influence those we minister to as they watch and witness our walk with the Lord. I remember many years ago how the Lord brought this home to me in my first pastorate. We had been invited to take our young people to lead the youth meeting of a neighbouring church. I asked one of our young men if he would lead in prayer and it came as quite a shock as I listened to him. There was nothing wrong with this prayer at all but, as I listened to him pour out his heart to the Lord,

I could actually hear myself praying. In other words, as this young man had listened to me lead the church in prayer, he modelled his own prayer on what he'd heard me pray. It was quite a shock because it reminded me that our lives as church leaders have a powerful effect on others who listen to us. Therefore, how important for us to give a godly example in the way we lead the church and not a selfish and ungodly attitude. Paul gave the Ephesian elders that godly example they needed.