

Derek French:

We continue in this programme looking at Paul's instruction to the elders of the church at Ephesus as they met for their final time on the beach at Miletus.

We began looking at this moving scene in our previous programme and noted how Paul was able to record the godly example of his own service for Christ and for them while he served in Ephesus. He referred to it not to boast but rather as a means to encourage them to serve the Lord in a similar way.

Today we consider the remainder of his time with them and in particular how he exhorted them to make sure they taught the entire word of God to the people. No part of the Bible was to be excluded, neither was it to be substituted by anything else. God's word is true and profitable and church leaders have the awesome responsibility to ensure they faithfully teach its method to both Christian believers and lost men and women and boys and girls.

To emphasise the utter importance of such faithful ministry, Paul warned them that there would be those, some even from among their own number, who would oppose this faithful teaching of the Bible to God's people, and as a result would only do untold damage to God's flock. All such must be resisted. The words of the prophet Isaiah come to mind in Isaiah 8 verse 20, *'To the law and to the testimony, if they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.'* In other words, all church leaders are to remain uncompromisingly faithful to the Bible's teaching and we must never substitute it with anything else.

We've the help again of Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin. Today Phillippa will read Acts 20 verses 25-38 for us and afterwards, Gerard will explain them to us.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*"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:

Such has been Paul's evangelistic zeal and care to share the message of the crucified and risen Saviour with lost souls, that he can tell the church leaders, 'I am innocent of the blood of all men.' How many Christians allow day after day to pass without sharing anything of the good news of Jesus with families, friends, contacts and colleagues at work, college or school? Not so with Paul. Well could he say, 'necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.'

But his efforts are not only to win sinners to Christ. They are also to build up individual Christians and churches in the word of God. That is why he instructs Timothy, his protégé, 'Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and teaching.' They must get well acquainted with the whole of God's teaching and revelation. In today's terms, they must be taught and blessed by the effect of the whole of the Bible's message in their lives. Paul is so strong on this point that he can justifiably underline his claim that 'I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.' Paul has made known to his hearers the total sweep of the word of God's saving, sanctifying and edifying truth. There is no side-stepping truth which may be unpalatable to some hearers, and no concentrating on pet subjects at the cost of the total balanced truth of God.

How do the elders measure up against Paul's example? How do you, assuming you have come to trust Christ? Are you determined to share Jesus Christ regularly with others? Do you read the Bible seriously

each day? If you have not yet read it all the way through, have you started to do that? If you have already read it all, do keep reading through all the Bible each year. Do you encourage others to do the same? There are many reading schemes to help you do that.

Paul now applies what he has said to the elders. He tells them to, 'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock', echoing the sentiments of his Lord Jesus who said, 'Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation.' Elders cannot care for the spiritual life of the church if they are careless about their own walk with God. Paul reminds them that God has bought the church with his own blood and so the Holy Spirit has made them shepherds over his flock. Heretics and ungodly teachers, like savage wolves, will attack the church flock from outside while others will sneak up as enemies within with foolish teachings to mislead and steal people from the church. For three years, Paul has warned them about such opposition and wept for them night and day.

In commending his brothers to God and to his gracious and edifying word, he reminds them of their great privilege of being recipients of an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. Those who God saves and sets aside will enjoy an eternal inheritance in heaven. In saying this, it seems that Paul, then called Saul, is recalling those first words of the Lord Jesus Christ to him on the road to Damascus. Then Jesus told him that he was saved 'to open their eyes in order to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, *that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in me.*'

Paul obviously is aware that even godly church leaders can be tripped up by materialism and the 'love of money' which is 'a root of all kinds of evil'. So he reminds them from his own transparent example that he has not coveted anyone's wealth or clothing, and that he actually has worked with his hands to provide necessities for himself and his Christian companions. He worked as a tentmaker. He commends them, similarly, to support 'the weak.' That probably includes physical weak and financially weak brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as those recovering from fleeing from the terrors of persecution.

He summarises what he says about money and giving with words from Jesus, which are not found in the gospels, that 'It is more blessed to give than receive.' That quote applies to today's Christians. It covers the use of our money, time, effort, ambitions and plans. All should be joyfully given into His hand and for His cause for 'God loves a cheerful giver.'

Paul has shared his heart with his beloved Ephesian elders. He has said what he needed to. Now he kneels down and prays with them all. Warnings are necessary, exhortations are good, but praying together is absolutely essential if God is to bless. Do you make praying together with Christians a priority? Are you regularly at the church prayer meeting? Do you readily pray informally with your Christian friends and fellow church attenders? It brings blessing.

Jesus said Christians should love one another. It is a sign of real Christian conversion that a person coming to trust Jesus Christ as Saviour soon finds the oneness and godly love for his new brothers and sisters in Christ and that they feel the same too. The Bible says that Christian love, one for another, is a witness to the world. Here, the love for Paul based on knowing Jesus is obvious as all the elders weep openly. They embrace the beloved apostle. Such love motivates them all because Christ's love for lost sinners touched Paul on the Damascus road and sent him to Ephesus to introduce lost and hell-bound sinners to his Lord and Saviour. Now although they accept God's will that Paul will now focus on going to Jerusalem and will see them no more, they do sorrow about it. Often those who know and follow Christ closely have to crucify their emotions and preferences in taking up their cross daily to follow Jesus.

Apart from continuing to pray for Paul, the elders can do only one thing more – they go with him to the ship. No doubt Paul is moved emotionally too, but can only now pray that the spiritual truths of which he has reminded them this day in Miletus will be taken by the Holy Spirit to challenge and help them. We know from the book of Galatians that this church has huge problems with Jewish legalists who attack the gospel by insisting that faith in Christ is insufficient unless it is accompanied by the Jewish rite of circumcision. Paul has warned them in person against this wrong Jewish legalism, just as he does in his letter to them. All he can do now is to pray and leave them to God as he moves on towards Jerusalem.