

The Sad Farewell

Acts 20:32-38

Introduction – Review

In our recent studies thus far, we have attempted to uncover, from Acts chapter 20, the depth and meaning of Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders.

Paul's past work (Acts 20:17-21)

We have listened in as Paul summarized his past work in Acts, chapter 20, verses 17 through 21. He told the elders that his ministry had been one of humility; that is, he recognized his weakness and yet, totally depended upon the strength of the Lord. His ministry was one of tears and trials.

Paul's future walk (Acts 20:22-24)

Paul went on in verses 22 through 24, to talk about his future walk being one of ongoing chains and bonds coupled with uncertainty.

Paul's present warning (Acts 20:28-30)

Then we studied closely Paul's present warning that began in verse 28 and continue through verse 30. It was a warning about the destroyers who would attack the church from without and the deceivers who would arise from within.

You could underline in your Bible, the three main sections of Paul's farewell speech by noting the three times Paul said, translated in my text:

- "And now . . ." (verse 22);
- "And now . . ." (verse 25);
- "And now . . ." (verse 32).

The third "And now . . ." begins Paul's final words.

Paul's Final Words

Look at verse 32 of Acts, chapter 20, for the first of Paul's final words to the Ephesian elders.

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.

Commended to God

1. First, Paul says, "I commend you to God!"

After all that Paul has said; after all the hours Paul has spent teaching them; after all the tears and training, Paul is like a parent. This is like the parent who has been hit with the realization of this kind of commendation at a high school or college graduation; in a sanctuary where the vows of a daughter or son are being repeated; at an airport terminal or the dock of a naval base. They are saying farewell to someone they prayed with to receive Christ; they trained them; they disciplined them; they gave them their spiritual roots, and now, they are giving them away. What more can you say than, "I commend [entrust] you to God.?"

By the way, the only people, the only parents, the only friends who are able to say, "I commend you to God," are people, parents, and friends who have commended themselves to God first. If you are not committed to God, you will never find the strength or courage to commit your children or your spouse to God. You will clutch and cling to them instead, making sure that you keep them nearby and that you discourage any adventure of faith; because you have never developed your own faith in a sovereign God.

Think of Paul's personal abandon to the will of God.

"Paul, where are you going next?"

"Remember? I'm going to Jerusalem!"

"What's going to happen to you there?"

"I don't know, but the spirit compels me to go!"

Is Paul reckless? Is he foolish in his faith and abandon to God?

According to Webster's dictionary, "abandon" means, "to give oneself over to something without restraint".

This is like a parachutist – there is that moment of truth when the rip chord is pulled. Or like a bungee jumper – a person who is much lower on the food chain than a parachutist! Yet, there are no second chances if that chord has not been measured properly.

Perhaps you remember the horrible story of the recent Super Bowl. The organizers had planned a bungee jumping demonstration right through the middle of the stadium ceiling. During the practice run, something went terribly wrong and the jumper fell and was killed on impact. That was reckless abandon.

However, to the believer who is commended to God, it is not a reckless leap. Spurgeon said it best, "There is no better place to be spiritually than shipwrecked on the island of God's sovereignty."

So Paul, with personal experience and total assurance, could hand these elders and this flock in Ephesus over to God. He had given them roots; he now gave them wings.

Committed to grace

2. Secondly, Paul not only commended them to God, he committed them to grace.

Notice the next phrase in verse 32.

And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace . . .

The expression "the word of His grace" is a synonym for the gospel. In verse 24, Paul talked about his ministry of testifying "of the gospel of the grace of God."

In Acts, chapter 14, verse 3, Paul talked about the message of God's grace.

They were commended to; challenged to hold closely the simple gospel of the grace of God. Paul did not tell them, "Now I commit you to my study

notes and don't forget to hash over everything I've said."

No. Paul said, "I commit you to the word of grace."

The apostle Paul was the defender and proclaimer of the grace of God. In fact, Paul used the word "grace" more than one hundred times in his letters. To the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, as well as to Timothy and Titus, Paul began his letters to them by saying, "Grace to you."

It is interesting that Paul combined the word "grace" with the gospel – and why not? Grace is a word that refers to unmerited, unchanging, undeserved favor. And isn't that the definition of the gospel? Isn't salvation unmerited, unchanging, undeserved?!

Listen as Paul wrote these words to the Ephesian church later, in chapter 1, verses 6 through 8a of that letter,

to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us . . .

Paul was overwhelmed by the grace of God.

Have you forgotten that Paul was guilty of murder and blasphemy? God not only showed him mercy, but God gave him grace.

Mercy is not getting something you deserve. Grace is getting something you did not deserve.

Let me give an example. A condemned criminal can be granted a stay of execution from the governor. That is mercy. However, if he moved out of prison into the mayor's home and became an adopted member of the mayor's family, that would be grace.

Let me further illustrate grace with a page or two from a book from my library.

One of my more memorable seminary professors had a practical way of illustrating the concept of grace for his students. At the end of his evangelism course, he would hand out the exam with the caution to read it all the way through before beginning to answer it. This caution was written on the exam as well.

As we read through the exam, it became unquestionably clear to each of us that we had not studied nearly enough. The further we read, the worse it became. About halfway

through, audible groans could be heard throughout the lecture hall. By the time we were turning to the last page, we were all ready to turn the exam in blank. It was impossible to pass.

On the last page, however, there was a note that read, "You have a choice. You can either complete the exam as given or sign your name at the bottom and in so doing, receive an A for this assignment."

Wow! We sat there stunned. "Was he serious? Just sign it and get an A?" Slowly, the point dawned on us, and one by one we turned in our tests and silently filed out of the room. It took the rest of the afternoon for me to get over it. I had the urge to go back and check with him one more time to make sure he was serious.

When I talked with him about it afterward, he shared some of the reactions he had received through the years as he had given the same exam. There were always students who did not follow instructions and began to take the exam without reading it all the way through. Some of them would sweat it out for the entire two hours of class time before reaching the last page. Their ignorance caused them unnecessary anxiety.

Then there were the ones who would read the first two pages, become angry, turn in their paper blank, and storm out of the room. They never realized what was available. As a result, they lost out totally.

One fellow, however, topped them all. He read the entire test, including the note at the end, but he decided to take the exam anyway. He did not want any gifts; he wanted to earn his grade. And he did. He made a C+, which was amazing considering the difficulty of the test. But he could have easily had an A.ⁱ

So, these men were commended to God and they were committed to a ministry of grace.

Challenged to give

3. Thirdly, these men are challenged to give.

Look at verses 33 through 35 of Acts, chapter 20.

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."

Paul's last recorded words to the Ephesian elders were a quotation from the Lord Jesus. It may surprise you to discover that this statement by Jesus Christ was never recorded in the gospels! It was a statement that Christ made that the church remembered, but had never written down under inspiration . . . until now.

This summarized everything Paul had been for them and what they needed in the future. Their ministry as elders, or "presbuteroi" in the Greek, as leaders in the church was to be a ministry of self-denial; a ministry of giving.

Paul said, "I have coveted no one's silver, gold or clothes . . .". The love of money has always characterized false teachers. In the Old Testament, Micah denounced the false spiritual leaders by saying, in chapter 3, verse 11a of that book,

[The] leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe, [the] priests instruct for a price and [the] prophets divine for money. . . .

Isaiah talked about the shepherds of the people who, like hungry dogs, were never satisfied, but continued to bribe, cajole, and extort the people's money. Look at Isaiah, chapter 56, verse 11.

And the dogs are greedy, they are not satisfied. And they are shepherds who have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each one to his unjust gain, to the last one.

Paul warned Titus that they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain, in chapter 1, verse 7, of that book,

For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward . . . not fond of sordid gain

Paul wanted to make sure that the gospel was offered without charge, as he said in I Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 18,

. . . That when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge . . .

A true shepherd does not fleece the flock; he feeds the flock.

Paul had been the example for the elders. Paul gave himself to God; Paul gave himself to the flock; Paul gave himself to the ministry of the word. Paul

gave himself with such intensity that for three years, it was non-stop.

Now, Paul concludes that it is far more blessed to give than to receive. And I want you to note, he is not talking about giving away money. The first part of this statement often causes people to misinterpret the latter phrase.

Paul is not saying to us, “It is better to give your money away, or it is better to give material things away than to receive them.”

No. Paul is talking about giving away your *life!* He is saying, “Elders in Ephesus, it is far more blessed to give your life away to people you serve than to have them serve you.”

That is true for every believer. It is a far greater thing, a far more blessed thing to give your life away to the needy, the weak, and the spiritually hungry than have someone constantly serving you.

So, specifically to the elders, “Be ready to give your life away. Be ready to model Christ, who loved the church and gave Himself for it. And, as you model Him, you will discover that it is a far more satisfying life than one of being served.”

Now notice verses 36 through 38 of Acts, chapter 20, as Paul finishes his speech.

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.

Throughout this last farewell there has run the dominant feeling of an affection as deep as an affection can be.

A few years earlier he had come to them as a stranger. When he arrived, he had created such a riot that for two hours, the arena was filled with thousands of people screaming, “Great is Artemis [or Diana] of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:34)

He had risked his life for them; he had liberated them from idolatry with the light of the gospel.

Consigned to grief

4. Fourthly, now these men are not only commended to God, committed to grace, and challenged to give, but they are also consigned to grief.

Notice verse 38a again. We are told that they were,

grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. . . .

The word “grieving” is the same word Luke used of Joseph and Mary, who, after finding young Jesus in the temple and being terrified that He had become lost in the crowd, said to Him, as Luke, chapter 2, verse 48b, tells us,

. . . Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You.

Any parent who has lost sight of a child in the shopping mall, the amusement park, or the grocery store knows that the word “anxiety” does not quite cover it all. There is a sense of panic; a sense of despair. And the longer you search for them, the greater the anxiety.

The word was used by Luke again in the story of the rich man in Hades who is crying to Abraham for relief, as told in chapter 16, verse 24b,

. . . I am in agony in this flame.

This is the word used to describe the elders’ sorrow and grief, combined with a sense of deep anxiety and fear.

In an effort perhaps, to calm their terror and quiet their tears, Paul invites the men to kneel with him right there on the dock. Imagine, there in the open, with people bustling about and the ship’s dock crowded with supplies – right there, they kneel. The Greek idiom is “to place the knees”.

The common posture in first century prayer was to stand and to lift the eyes to heaven. The Lord regularly prayed in that position. Standing in someone’s presence was to show them respect and honor. Kneeling in prayer expressed deep feelings; such as, utter helplessness and need. Jesus Christ knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane, being deeply sorrowful, grieved, and in deep need of the Father.

The elders knelt together with the great apostle Paul, who prayed with them and prayed for them. What a prayer that must have been.

The Bible then tells us, they embraced him and repeatedly kissed him. The Greek is so descriptive, “Having fallen around his neck, they kept on kissing him.” The Greek language indicates that each one of them did not want to let go of him even when the call to board the vessel had been repeated.

Application

If we summarize Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders and to us as a church, now under the influence of this inspired scripture, I believe we would need to apply it in the form of several things.

Our relationship with the Lord must be balanced by . . .

Our relationship with the Lord must be balanced by several things. Let me give them to you.

Abandonment to the Holy Spirit

1. First, our relationship with the Lord must be balanced by abandonment to the Holy Spirit.

We must be in total submission to the directives of the Spirit of God; we must have a selfless pursuit of what pleases Him.

Alertness to the enemies of our soul

2. Secondly, our relationship with the Lord must be balanced with alertness to the enemies of our soul.

Being abandoned to the Spirit does not mean, "Well, I'll just float through life. He's in charge, so I'll just sit back and relax!"

No! The warning of Paul needs to ring in the ears of the church leaders and the body at large. "Watch out! Be careful! Don't sleep at your post! Your enemy, the devil, roams about seeking whom he may devour!"

Allegiance to the grace of God

3. Thirdly, our relationship with the Lord must be balanced by allegiance to the grace of God.

When Paul had said everything, he turned their attention to the grace of God, the grace of the gospel, the grace of a saving God. Then, they knelt with the one who had introduced them to grace and prayed to the God of all grace.

Where is your allegiance? In whom do you hope?

The world has many hopes; they have placed their future into the hands of a myriad of hopes and speculations.

Let me read from an article from *The Wall Street Journal*, by Leslie Chang.

The island [Taiwan] gave a hero's welcome Thursday to surely the oddest guest ever to be granted a state visit: a 2,400 year old tooth said to have come from the Buddha himself. Flown in on a specially chartered plane, the holy molar touched down to cheering throngs led by Taiwan's premier. Radio stations devoted up-to-the-minute reports to the tooth's stately progress.

"Let us have peace and harmony in our society," said Premier Vincent Siew, offering a prayer to the tooth in an airplane hangar converted into a makeshift shrine. Under a red and gold banner proclaiming, "Ceremony to Welcome the Buddha's Tooth Relic," the object of attention rested after its trip in a miniature gold-plated pagoda, wrapped in clouds of incense.

Taiwan has high hopes for the holy tooth. Believers say it can end a recent string of mishaps, from plane crashes to corruption scandals. But fierce squabbling has already created bad karma. Opponents say the government should solve problems, not fan superstition. Some ask why Taiwan's president, a noted Christian, will preside over a mass prayer for the tooth this weekend.

True believers remain serene. Says You Kuen-song, a food-company executive waiting at the sweltering airport to catch a glimpse, "Once the tooth has arrived, our troubles will be over."ⁱⁱ

Paul says, "I commend you to God and the word of His grace which is able to build you up, to give you hope that is rock solid, and to give you an inheritance which you will one day enjoy as you live for eternity in the kingdom, built and fashioned by the God of all grace."

Paul wrote several years later to the church in Ephesus, led by these men who had tearfully waved goodbye, these words, from chapter 3, verses 20 and 21,

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. . . .

And in chapter 6, verses 23 and 24, Paul wrote, ***Peace be to the brethren [flock], and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord***

Jesus Christ. Grace be with all those who | love our Lord Jesus Christ...

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/21/1998 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Charles Stanley, The Gift of Forgiveness (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), pp. 43-44.

ⁱⁱ Leslie Chang, The Wall Street Journal.