

A Warning About Wolves

Acts 20:29

Introduction

I have read that the region of North Africa that is now known as the Sahara desert was once filled with herds of buffalo, lions, and antelope. Cattle grazed in lush pastureland that is now buried under mountains of sand. With the absence of rainfall, this once fertile land has been transmuted into a howling, relentless desert. I found it interesting that the sands of the Sahara desert are never satisfied. They are constantly moving southward, claiming more and more of the African continent. In fact, the Sahara desert is moving southward at the rate of one hundred seventy five feet every day.

However, there are rivers of water that flow from the Atlas Mountains underneath the Sahara desert. Sometimes the water of these rivers comes to the surface and the land around it becomes what we call, an oasis. On an oasis, vegetation, crops, and animal life flourish. As long as the water is there, the killing sands of the desert are kept at bay.

The church of Jesus Christ is an oasis in the midst of a desert land. It has the water of life, for Jesus Christ, the creator of the church, said, as recorded in John, chapter 7, verse 37,

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.

In John, chapter 4, verses 10b and 14a, He told a thirsty woman,

. . . [I give] you living water. . . whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst . . .

The church of Jesus Christ is an oasis that offers the truth of the gospel, the water of life to all who are dying of thirst; to all who are captives of the desert.

But the desert is never satisfied. It waits like a bandit, to steal into the church and sweep it away.

What will keep the church from harm? What will keep the flock safely feeding in the fertile oasis, free from harm?

Review

I invite your attention back to chapter 20 in the book of “action” or Acts, where we are given the answer. The answer is found in the job description of church leadership. We began our study of their role of feeding, protecting, leading, guiding, and guarding the flock in our last discussion. We noted that there were three terms for the office of church leader used in chapter 20, and they all referred to the same man or office.

Three terms for church leaders

- First, the “presbuteros,” or “elder,” relates to the responsibility of the office. It is a term that probably originated in the Jewish synagogue to refer to the wise, elderly men. Paul refers to these men as “presbuteroi” in verse 17.
- Then, we looked at the Greek term “episkopos”. This word relates to the rule of the elders who are responsible to “oversee” the flock. And we noted, from verse 28, that the ordination of the elder to the position of overseer (or bishop) was the work of the Holy Spirit. Long before the body recognized these men who were qualified and gifted to lead, the Holy Spirit had gifted, energized, and prepared them to be leaders.

- Finally, we noted the objective of the office, seen in the third term “poimenos”. The “poimenos,” which is translated “pastor,” is a word that refers to the role of the office. You could literally translate “poimenos” to mean “feeder”. It is the same Greek word that gives us our English word “pasture,” and it clearly denotes the leading aspect of all that the elders do. They are shepherds, and they are to act as shepherds who guard, protect, guide, and, most importantly, see to it that the flock is well fed. They are not to entertain the flock, they are to equip the flock for living.

Now granted those elders, like myself, who primarily preach and teach the word, can certainly make the learning process a little more interesting. One of my seminary professors used to challenge us, as soon-to-be preachers, by saying, “Gentlemen, it is a sin for you to be boring.”

If that is true, then preachers sin weekly.

This past week, someone sent to my Internet mailbox the story of a little boy who went up to the pastor after the morning service and said, “Pastor, when I grow up and get a job, I’m going to give you some money.”

“Why, that sure is a nice thing to do,” said the pastor smiling, “but why do you want to do that?”

“Because,” the kid responded, “my Dad says you’re the poorest preacher he’s ever heard.”

I am still wondering why I received that!

Job description for church leaders

Just what is the pastor/elder/bishop to do? Well, Paul told the elders of Ephesus, and every generation to come, exactly what to do. You will notice in verse 28a, he emphatically states,

Be on guard for yourselves . . .

- He tells the guardians of the flock to first, be on guard for themselves.

Too many church leaders have been lulled into spiritual slumber, or worse yet, they have been lured into mediocrity.

Vance Havner used to say, “The devil will allow a preacher to prepare a sermon if it will keep him from preparing himself.”

The same is true for every Sunday school teacher, small group leader, ministry director, as well as pastor/elder/bishop. They can get so caught up in

the physical and spiritual needs of others, the cares of others, the sins of others that their spiritual life and walk is ignored. They become distant from the Chief Shepherd that they are trying to draw others toward.

Elders, “Be on guard for yourselves.”

Now notice further in verse 28,

Be on guard for yourselves and for 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.

- Be on guard for yourselves and then, be on guard for the flock!

Why the urgency, Paul? Why the warning?! Verse 29 tells us.

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

“So, Paul, you guess they are coming?”

“I know!”

“Paul, you have a pretty good idea that the wolves might come?”

“I know!”

Warning – Destroyers From Without!

The destroyers are coming! The predators from without are seeking to get in!

Jesus Christ had already warned His disciples of the wolves who would come in sheep’s clothing, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 7, verse 15. Repeatedly He warned His own of the false teaching of His day.

Paul will also warn of the false teachers who would:

- “. . . [lead] astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.” (II Corinthians 11:3b);
- “. . . preach another Jesus . . .” (II Corinthians 11:4a);
- “. . . [bring a] different gospel” (Galatians 1:6b).

And, Paul says of these false teachers who seek to invade the church, in Galatians, chapter 1, verse 9b,

. . . he is to be accursed!

Since the first century, the accursed wolves/false teachers stand ever ready, pounding at the door of the church through various means. Some seduce the church with pleasant messages of materialism and prosperity; some threaten the church with persecution; some convince the church to compromise its stand; and some pervert the church through their teaching.

The character and conduct of destroyers

I want to quickly move through several characteristics of these wolves, these false teachers who seek to invade the church.

They deny the deity of Jesus Christ

1. First, false teachers deny the deity of Jesus Christ.

I John, chapter 2, verse 22, tells us,

Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.

From the first century, the denial of Christ's deity has taken on many names. In the first century it was called Arianism; in the this century it is called Mormonism.

Arianism was condemned in the second century as heresy by church leaders who believed in Jesus Christ as God in the flesh. Strangely, the church today seems reticent to call anything heresy, even Mormonism, which by the way, is making a bid to be considered evangelical. The president of the Mormon church said, in recent media interviews when asked about the Mormon doctrine which explicitly teaches that God was once a mere mortal who elevated to the status of deity, said, "I wouldn't say that . . . We don't emphasize that . . . I don't know that we teach that."

What did John just say?

Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?

That is, the eternality and equality of Father and Son are denied.

John calls them all liars. If you hold to a lie, why not lie about the fact that you believe a lie. Since you are, in fact, related to the father of lies, who, when he speaks a lie, speaks his native language (John 8:44).

John wrote in I John, chapter 4, verses 3 and 5 through 6a,

and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. . . . They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us . . .

They consider Christ dying on the cross as foolishness

2. Secondly, false teachers consider Christ dying on the cross as foolishness.

They might say, "Why do you need to believe all that stuff about Calvary? I'm not that bad. Why would anybody have to die for my sins?"

I Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 18 through 20, says,

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

A member of our flock clipped an article out of the *Wall Street Journal* a few months ago and gave it to me. It read,

Five years ago the feminist re-imagining movement burst on the American religious scene with a conference. Participants sang praises to the goddess Sophia, rather than Christ. They addressed their deities as "Mother God, Earth Mother, or Womb of Creation". One speaker who happens to be a female professor at Union Theological Seminary, Delores Williams, announced, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement." (We call it a doctrine.) "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."

This poor woman did nothing more than fulfill the words of scripture that said that those that deny that Christ is God will also believe that the cross is foolishness. Each speaker, by the way, at this conference, was blessed in the name of Sophia. The conference ended with more than a thousand participants biting into large, red apples to express their solidarity with Eve. They were commanded to, "rejoice in our resistance, in our solidarity with all women who seek to be the word. To bite the apple is

to recommit ourselves to resisting all those forces who oppress us.”

That is from the pit!

Paul goes on to say to the Corinthians in verses 23 and 24,

but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God.

They suppress the truth of creation

3. Thirdly, false teachers suppress the truth of creation and create their own speculations.

Romans, chapter 1, verses 20 through 25, tells us,

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. . . .

They twist the grace of God into licentiousness/lasciviousness

4. Fourthly, false teachers twist the grace of God into licentiousness/lasciviousness.

Jude, verse 4, says,

For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness

...

In other words, these are the false teachers that Jude will go on to describe further; but he begins by telling us that these teachers turn the grace of God into an excuse to sin. The grace of God has been perverted into lawlessness.

William Barclay wrote,

These men believed that since the grace of God is wide enough to cover any sin, a man can sin as he likes. He will be forgiven anyhow; the more he sins, the greater the grace; therefore, why worry about sin? Grace will look after that. So grace has been perverted into a justification for sin.ⁱ

Let me bring this down to where we live day in and day out. Frankly, ladies and gentlemen, I consider the threat of licentiousness to have long replaced the threat of legalism.

A generation ago, do's and don'ts were the definition of mature Christianity – and that missed the mark. Today, the lack of dos and don'ts are considered mature Christianity – and that also misses the mark. A generation ago, standards of dress and conduct were required if you were to be truly spiritual – and that was not right. Today, however, no distinction of modesty or prudence is the mark of true spirituality. Why should anybody be bothered about anything a Christian should wear? And, that is not right either.

The church seems to swing between legalism and licentiousness. So, you cannot do anything or you can do everything. And the church, which is hanging around licentiousness more than legalism these days, has conveniently silenced anyone who is concerned over it by calling them a weaker brother.

If you want to test what I am saying, just try telling someone that you are concerned about something they have done. Let's pick a subject; such as seeing a recent blockbuster movie, *The Titanic*. What would the average Christian think of someone coming up to them and saying, "Listen, we're Christians, and I'm really concerned about your sensitivity to sin being diminished by going to see that particular movie."?

They might respond, "What planet did you come from? What's wrong with the Titanic?"

You answer, "From what I read about it, the movie included profanity and nudity. And the story line revolved around the sexual immorality of two young people. You know the Bible doesn't call that a love story, it calls it fornication and commands the believer to run from the presence of it."

“We’ve got a legalist in here! You must be one of those weaker brothers I’ve heard about!”

I personally wonder how many weaker brothers are, in reality, holier people that God has placed in our lives to challenge our licentious compromises.

I want to say something else, since I am making so many friends today. I wonder how many fathers are “asleep at the wheel,” instead of actively encouraging their wives and daughters on the subject of modesty. Hey, Dad! If you have not had several long discussions with your daughter about how she gets attention by what she wears, and why she should not wear that thing she is trying to get out of the house in, you are either napping or you just do not care.

I will never forget Chuck Swindoll several years ago, literally hollering in his sermon, “Men, wake up to the way your wife and your daughters are dressing! Wake up!”

That is not legalism, that is shepherding!

Now, my oldest daughter is ten, so most of my battle is in front of me. She came in last week, after having been out cutting the grass down by the road, and said, “Dad, while I was cutting the grass, some guys drove by with their windows down and whistled at me.”

The trouble was, she loved it! I told her, “Listen, when boys drive by and whistle at you, spit in their window!”

That was not exactly biblical advice, but I think it might work!

They are unaccountable to others

5. Fifthly, false teachers are unaccountable to others.

Jude, verses 7 through 8a, tells us,

Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire. Yet in the same manner these men, also by dreaming, defile the flesh, and reject authority . . .

One of the marks of a false teacher is that he is not involved in a local church. He is not accountable to a body of believers, a body of shepherds – he has created his own church, his own worship, his own religion. And he propagates his own religion through

television, radio, and any other means of gaining an audience.

They are unaccountable.

They magnify personal authority

6. Sixthly, they magnify personal authority.

The next phrase in verse 8 of Jude says,

. . . and [they] reject authority, and revile angelic majesties.

That is, they claim to be greater than, bigger than the voice of authority over angelic majesties.

It sounds exciting; it sounds courageous, but these false teachers lack a proper respect for the terror of the enemy of the church. Movements today are busy bossing Satan and his demons about, as if what they say has inherent power.

I imagine one of the first modern day preachers to do this was a man named Billy Sunday, who was a poor theologian, but an exciting speaker in the early 1900’s. He would shock his audience by talking to the devil as if the devil were on the stage. Sunday would boss him around, make fun of him, and ultimately, condemn him to hell. He would often act out a mock boxing match with the devil, in which Billy Sunday, of course, would always win.

The problem, however, was that Billy Sunday did not win. By the end of his ministry, people had stopped coming to hear him preach. This was partly because his children were all alcoholics and partly because he was accused of mishandling the more than one million dollars that his crusades generated.

Now, I’m not saying Billy Sunday was a false teacher, but I am reminded of our current day fascination with the verbal bullying of demons, the bossing around of Satan, and this characteristic of false teachers to magnify their authority. Jude writes in verses 9 and 10a,

But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, “The Lord rebuke you.” But these men revile the things which they do not understand . . .

They find fault with the church and create their own following

7. One more characteristic, false teachers find fault with the church and create their own following.

Jude, verse 16, says,

These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage.

Ultimately, false teachers want people to follow them. So they discredit the church; they accuse the shepherds; they find fault. According to Jude, why was this? It was “. . . for the sake of gaining an advantage.”

Paul wrote to the Colossian church, in chapter 2, verse 8,

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception . . .

The words “take you captive” are from an original word used for kidnapping someone. Paul says in effect, “See to it that no philosopher or deceiver kidnaps you from your homeland of light and carries you away to the land of darkness.”

Conclusion

We need to stop at this point and, in our next discussion, I will preach the second part of my sermon.

Perhaps you are thinking, “The church does not seem to have a chance. There seem to be so many

enemies, so many deceivers, so much against the church. What are we to do?”

First of all, remember that God bought His church. God ultimately builds His church. God has gifted men to lead the church. God indwells the church. God purchased the church with His own blood, and He promised the church that the Holy Spirit would indwell it. He promised that, even though the gates of hell would mount an incredible offensive that has been going on now for nearly twenty centuries, the church would not be overcome (Matthew 16:18).

There is an ancient legend about Leonides, a Spartan general who was defending Greece against the Persians. In one battle, the Persians were outnumbering the Greeks ten to one. One of the generals came up to Leonides and said, “General, the Persians so outnumber us that when they shoot their arrows into the sky, it darkens the sky. What are we to do?”

General Leonides responded, “We will fight in the shade.”

And so we will. As an oasis surrounded by the waiting, encroaching, dangerous desert of error, we will continue to look to the Chief Shepherd to study the word in order to be cautious, critical, and careful in our thinking. And ultimately, as a body of believers and as individuals, as this oasis holds the water of life, offer this water of the gospel of life to thirsty people who seek to be free from the desert of sin.

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ⁱ William Barclay, The Letters of John and Jude (Westminster Press, 1960), p. 180.