

CGYG & LIFE Bible Study - Acts

Acts 20:1 – 21:16

Today's passage concludes Paul's missionary journeys in the book of Acts and introduces the last portion of the book of Acts, in which Paul is arrested and imprisoned. Setting out from Ephesus in the province of Asia, he traveled through Macedonia and Achaia (Greece), then back through Macedonia again, before returning to Jerusalem. Along the way, he wrote 2 Corinthians while in Macedonia (2 Cor 2:13, 7:5-6), and Romans while in Achaia (likely in or around Corinth – Romans 15:25-26, 16:1-2).

Read Acts 20:1-12

-Acts 19:21 tells us that Paul decided (or "resolved in the Spirit" (ESV)) to go from Ephesus to Jerusalem via Macedonia and Achaia, which made for a very large detour. Why did Paul decide to go by this route (v.1-2; you might also consider Romans 15:23-27; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4; 9:1-5)?

- to encourage and strengthen the churches there (e.g. in Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica, Corinth, etc.) (v.2)
- to collect a love offering from the churches of Macedonia & Achaia for the poor among the church in Jerusalem (cross-references)

-Why did so many men accompany Paul back to Jerusalem? (v.4-5; cf. 2 Cor 8:16-21; 9:4)

- likely as representatives from the different churches that had contributed; sent to accompany the gift
 - measure of accountability, but also opportunity to build fellowship between churches
- note, in passing, that Luke rejoins Paul's entourage in 20:5 (pronoun again shifts to 'we'/us')

-What can we learn from 20:7-12 about worship in the early church?

- met on the first day of the week (1st reference to this practice in 20:7; also in 1 Cor 16:7)
- broke bread together (i.e. celebrated the Lord's Supper)
- someone preached (in this case, Paul – for longer than usual, probably, since he was leaving the next day)
- in this case, they met in the evening (?perhaps after the end of the work day?)

Read Acts 20:13-38

-Why did Paul decide to bypass Ephesus? (v.16, cf. v.6)

- wanted to get to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost (50 days after Passover); didn't want to be drawn into a long visit
- was more than 2 weeks after Passover; thus, < 5 weeks left until Pentecost by the time he reached Miletus

In vv.17-35, Paul addresses the elders (*presbyteroi*, v.17) or overseers (or bishops, i.e. *episkopoi*, v.28) of the church at Ephesus (the 2 terms referring to the same group of men).

-How does Paul characterize his ministry? Why can he say that he is 'innocent of the blood of all men' (cf. Ezekiel 33:1-9)?

- a ministry conducted with great humility and with tears – i.e. with great fervency/urgency (v.19)
 - cared for people and the church of God – served 'with tears' (v.19); warned 'with tears' (v.31)
 - a trying time – severe testing by the plots of the Jews (v.19)
 - characterized by courageous proclamation – didn't hesitate to preach anything that would be helpful (in spite of the trials and persecutions he faced) (v.20), but instead called both Jews & Gentiles to repentance and faith (v.21)
 - very thorough ministry
 - preached in public and in private (house to house) (v.20)
 - proclaimed the whole will of God (i.e. entire plan of salvation) (v.27)
 - very passionate for & devoted to preaching Christ
 - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace was so central to his life that he was willing not just to work hard and suffer for it, but even to die (v.24), so long as he remained faithful to his task
 - intense, hard work – warned them 'night and day' for 3 years (v. 31)
 - a ministry that demonstrated by example
 - self-supporting ministry (v.33-35)
- he is clear of the blood of all men because he has faithfully discharged his duty to proclaim the whole counsel of God to all men

-Several times in these verses Paul reminds the Ephesian elders of their personal experience and knowledge of his ministry ["You know..." (v.18,20); 'Remember...' (v.31); "You yourselves know..." (v.34)]. Why does he remind them of these experiences?

- likely there were those who were slandering Paul and trying to discredit his ministry – reminder to the elders that they knew from their own experience that such accusations were not true
- presenting his life and ministry as an example for them to follow, in
 - not hesitating to declare the whole will of God and all else that would be useful to their hearers (v.20,27)
 - keeping watch over the flock, even as Paul did night and day for 3 years (v.31)
 - working hard in order to help the weak (v.33-35)

-What was Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders? What does this passage teach us about the role of elders/overseers/pastors in the Church?

- they are to keep watch over themselves, and over the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers
- they do not watch over 'their' flock/church, but God's church
 - 'keep watch over... the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers' (v.28)
 - the church bought by the blood of God's Own (i.e. Christ – v.28) – thus belongs to God
- they are 'shepherd' (or pastor/care for) the church (i.e. the sheep)
 - need to feed (i.e. teach) the flock & tend/care for them
 - defend them against wolves (i.e. false teachers) who attack from outside the flock
 - defend them against those who arise from within the church to distort the truth
 - need to work hard in order to help the weak
- "blood on their hands" if they don't discharge their duties to keep watch faithfully

-What does this passage tell us about qualifications and character of elders/overseers? (if you have time, you might also consider 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 2 Tim. 2:15, 4:1-5; Titus 1:6-14; 1 Pet. 5:1-4)

- appointed by the Holy Spirit (v.28) – thus, qualifications need to be in line with the Spirit's directions, as given in His Word
- must be Godly men who keep close watch over their own walk with God (v.28)
 - keep watch over the flock out of love for Christ, who bought the church with His own blood (v.28)
- caring and able to teach – need to care for and feed to flock (v.28)
- must know the Scriptures and be able to handle them correctly – in order to defend against false doctrine (v.29-30)
- must be vigilant and always ready to defend the truth actively (v.29-30) – not just passive (i.e. knowing and handling the truth correctly, but failing to defend the flock and warn them of danger)
- must not be covetous (v.33) but hard-working and ready to help the weak (v.35); ready to give more than receiving (v.35)

-What does this passage say about the motivation that should undergird the elder's ministry? (see also 1 Pet 5:14)

- primary motivation - love for Christ, who bought the Church with His own blood (v.28)
 - if Christ loved the church to the point of laying down His life for her, elders (and all Christians) must also love her and care for/protect her
 - all the hard work, vigilance, commitment, etc. flow from this love – cf. Paul's desire to complete the task that the Lord Jesus had given him (v.24)
- Jesus Himself is the Good Shepherd, who lay down His life for the sheep (John 10:1-18) – elders are 'under-shepherds' who should follow His example, and thus be examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:1-4)
- crown of glory from the Chief Shepherd – a powerful motivation

-Why is the ministry of the Word so important in the life & work of the elder?

- needed to feed & defend the flock
- it is the Word of grace that is able to build people up and gives them an inheritance among those sanctified

Read Acts 21:1-16

-Acts 21:4 says that the disciples at Tyre "through the Spirit... urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." Does this contradict Acts 20:22-23, which says that the Spirit was compelling Paul to go to Jerusalem?

- not a contradiction – the Holy Spirit was indeed leading Paul
 - likely, some disciples prophesied through the Spirit of Paul's coming sufferings, causing others (of their own accord) to urge him not to go (as in the case of Agabus & Paul's companions in v.10-12)

-**For further thought:** In what ways is Paul's journey to Jerusalem reminiscent of Christ's journey to Jerusalem to be crucified?

- both traveled there with a group of disciples
- both were opposed by hostile Jews who plotted against their lives
- both received or made 3 predictions about their coming sufferings
- both would be tried by both the Jews and Gentiles
- both expressed total abandonment to the will of God – ready to lay down life and not be deflected from God's purposes

Reflection and Application

Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders yields many important lessons about Biblical eldership. Because they are made overseers of the church by the Holy Spirit (v.28), elders **must** therefore be men who meet the qualifications laid out by the Holy Spirit in Scripture (e.g. 1 Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:6-14, etc.) As undershepherds of Christ, they are to be men who keep watch over themselves, living lives of obedience to their Master, even to the point of death. As servants of the Good Shepherd, they must love and care for the flock, following the example of the One who lay down His life for the sheep (John 10:15). Following Paul's example, they are to feed and nurture the flock through constant teaching and preaching, being careful to proclaim the whole counsel of God and not hesitating to preach anything that would be helpful to their hearers. At the same time, they must be ever vigilant, watching, warning, and defending the flock against false teachers who would attack, both from inside and outside the church. Thus, they must be men who know and correctly handle the Word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), and who are prepared to preach that Word – which can build them up and give them an inheritance among all those who are sanctified – both in season and out of season (1 Tim. 4:2). Spend time in prayer for your elders and pastors, that God would strengthen and equip them for the heavy burden they bear for the sake of Christ and His Church. Pray also that God would continue to provide Godly and qualified men who would feed and defend the flock faithfully.