

32. Encouraging Priorities in Parting Words

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Date: 17 January 2010

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to these words that we read in Acts chapter 20, page 929 in the Church Bibles. All about the encouraging priorities in parting words.

I wonder what you would say to the people that you love most, if you knew for sure that you were never going to see them again. Your family, your closest friends, perhaps your Christian fellowship.

It's quite a hard thing to think about, isn't it? But there's no doubt that the things that we would choose to dominate our time under those circumstances would reveal a very great deal about what our real priorities are in life, don't you think?

Acts chapter 20 is all about parting words. As Paul the Apostle leaves behind forever the mission field of Greece and Asia Minor and heads west to Rome and from there, well, to who knows where.

The long chapter covers a lot of travel and indeed it covers quite a lot of time as well. But in fact, it's easy to see where Luke's emphasis is. It's clearly in the discourse with the Ephesian church leaders that takes up most of the chapter from verse 17 right to the end.

[1 : 23] The journeyings of verses 1 to 16 through Greece and Macedonia and back to Asia, and once again to Ephesus, which again is in focus, is a very long one.

And what Luke gives us, therefore, is a very brief summary of perhaps, well, maybe two years of travel in verses 1 to 6.

Then, in verses 7 to 12, he gives us what is no doubt an example of what Paul was doing wherever he went as he met the church in Troas.

And then finally, in verses 17 to the end, he gives us a detailed exposition of his pattern of ministry to these Ephesian leaders. So, as is very typical for Luke, his writing here is very ordered, very careful, very purposeful.

Verses 1 to 6 show us his universal concern to encourage real gospel people, all those who have been brought to Christ and formed into his churches.

[2 : 27] Verses 7 to 12 then show us an example of his real gospel priority, what he did as he went around encouraging these churches. Then finally, he gives us, from verse 17 onwards, in great detail, his exposition of the real gospel pattern of his own ministry, but also for the ongoing ministry that was to continue after the apostle left them.

So, all through the chapter, we're seeing the encouraging priorities of Paul's parting words. We're told explicitly, you'll see in verse 21, that these are consciously parting words.

He said to them, you will never see my face again. And if we need reminding, the very end of the chapter, verse 38, they recognized they would not see his face again.

Again, these are parting words. So, what we have here, in a very personal way from Paul, is exactly what we find in his pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus, or in Peter's second letter.

A self-conscious preparation of the churches for life after the apostles in person have gone. How to go on being apostolic churches in the post-apostolic era.

[3 : 45] Now, churches will remain apostolic, of course, if they remain committed to the apostles' doctrine, everything that they've been taught.

And, of course, they would continue to have that written down in many of the epistles from the apostles. But more than that, they'll keep on track, not only in what they believe in their doctrine, but also they keep on track in what they do, in the priorities that they have in their own ministries.

And it's these priorities, if you like, this pattern of ministry that Paul lays out for us so clearly in this chapter, Acts 20. Both his personal example, in terms of his priorities at a time of parting, but also the clear pattern that he instructs the church to follow in his absence, as they emulate all that Paul has shown them of what real ministry was throughout his time with them.

It's a long chapter. I want to cover it all today, so obviously we can't be completely comprehensive. A couple of years ago, we spent two weeks looking just at this second half of Acts 20.

It's a series called The Pattern of the Apostolic Church. So if you want more detail, I guess it'll be on the website or on CD somewhere. But today, we're going to look at the whole chapter in these three sections, just to try and get a sense of this bigger picture.

[5 : 07] So first then, look at verses 1 to 6. Paul's encouragement of real gospel people. What these verses about journeyings all around Macedonia and Greece tell us is that Paul's universal concern for all the churches was that they should be encouraged.

Look at verse 1. After encouraging the church in Ephesus, he went off to Macedonia. Verse 2, he went all through the regions, bringing much encouragement. And if you look down to verse 12, at the end of that whole section, you'll see it ends there with the same word.

They were not a little comforted, encouraged. It's exactly the same word in the Greek. Paul has a great ministry of church encouragement, not just church planting.

Church planting is rather an in-subject among evangelical Christians today. And certainly, we need churches to be planted, perhaps as never before. But personally, I've never been quite convinced that those who insist on church planting as being the apostolic method, that they're actually quite right.

I don't see that in the book of Acts. I don't think Acts speaks of it in quite that way. What Acts does describe, very clearly, is word planting, gospel planting. And what it describes is word growth.

[6 : 26] That's Luke's constant language, isn't it? The word increased. Now, of course, when you plant the word, the word bears fruit. And that fruit becomes the church, and churches are formed.

So, these two things are inextricably linked. They're inseparable. But it is the gospel that produces the church, not vice versa. That's very important for us to remember. So, I think in the language of Acts, it would probably be more accurate to say that Paul had a ministry of gospel planting, and then church nurturing and strengthening and preserving, so that the church will go on propagating the true gospel and planting that true gospel more and more.

And all of that, all of that ongoing ministry to the churches is encapsulated in this word, in verse 1 and 2, this word, encouragement. New Christians and growing Christians need organized pastoral care in an ongoing way.

That was Jesus' great commission, wasn't it? He did not say, go into all the world and make converts, but he said, go and make disciples. That is, those who are committed wholeheartedly to the church of Jesus Christ through baptism, and who are taught to obey, says Jesus, all that I have commanded you, the apostles.

And that's what pastoral care is. Pastoral care in the Christian church is the fulfilling of the great commission by discipling people. By first evangelizing them, and then going on encouraging them.

[8 : 02] A lot of Waffle often talks in the church about pastoral care, and usually I find it's nothing at all whatsoever to do with what the Bible means by that language.

But here Paul very clearly has a universal concern for the pastoral care of his churches. And it's all about bringing encouragement.

Encouragement to go on in dogged discipleship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Now when encouragement, it means both to exhort in the sense of to encourage and to urge to go on and be faithful, but it also means to instill with comfort and courage.

To encourage, literally, put courage into someone. And that's seen constantly as the pattern of apostolic pastoral care. If you remember back to Acts chapter 11, Barnabas was sent by the apostles to the church in Antioch.

And what did he do? He encouraged them to remain faithful to the Lord. In Acts 14, 22, after the first missionary journey, Paul went through all the churches, quote, strengthening the souls of the disciples and encouraging them in the faith, saying through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

[9 : 19] In Acts chapter 9, after the persecution, we were told that the whole church was being built up in the comfort, the encouragement of the Holy Spirit and multiplied. the encouragement of gospel people everywhere.

That's Paul's pastoral care for the churches. And that's his church preservation ministry.

Because he knows that churches and Christians will not survive without that kind of ongoing apostolic encouragement. But how does he encourage them as he's going around all of these churches?

What does he actually do? Well, Hebrews 6, verse 18, tells us that holding fast to our real Christian hope is what gives us strong encouragement, what gives us an anchor for our souls in life.

And Paul knows in practical terms how it is that we find that, how it is that we find great strength in our Christian hope. He wrote the letter to the Romans during these travels and in Romans 15, verse 4, he says, it's through the encouragement of the scriptures that we have hope.

[10 : 30] That's what instills courage and strength to us. And so having shown us his universal practice of wanting to encourage all the churches in all the places, in verses 7 to 12, Luke gives us a glimpse into an example of that priority in practice, what it actually looked like.

So look at verses 7 to 12, Paul's example of the real gospel priority. Now what we have here recorded for us is a miracle story, but it's not the miracle that you think.

The heading of our section here in the ESV is absolutely wrong. Certainly it isn't a summary of Luke's pointed, important words in this text.

It's perfectly clear that Luke adds the specific instance to show up close Paul's general method. so that we can see what his priority in pastoral ministry was when he visited all these churches all around Greece and Asia.

His purpose was to bring to them the encouragement of the scriptures because that alone would strengthen their hope. And that's what this passage makes so clear. It's all about Paul's talk.

[11 : 45] Why doesn't the heading say Paul talks all night at Troas? Because that's what it's about. Look at verse 7. Paul talked with them. He prolonged his speech until midnight.

Despite the late hour, despite the heat from these lamps in an upper room in a very hot country like Turkey, verses 8 and 9, Paul talked still longer. He didn't say, look, the church is terribly hot tonight.

It's very airless. I know you're all feeling sleepy, so we'll just cut short tonight. No, he didn't. Not even, verse 10, a death in the pews was going to stop this sermon.

Eutychus was a member of Troas Youth and he was sitting in the front of the gallery and fell down and he died. Well, I'm looking at some of the young folk up here and I'm guessing if one of you fell down and broke your neck and died, that would be very quickly the end of our service, wouldn't it?

But not for Paul. Just the briefest of accounts in verse 10 tell us of his quick remedy. He went down, sorted it all out. Verse 11, a quick sandwich and then back to the task and he spoke all night.

[13 : 00] Now don't you think the real miracle is verse 11 and not verse 10? Of course, verse 10's a miracle. But the real miracle here in this church is that no one has put off their stride for more than a few moments before it's back on with the real gospel priority, the unfolding of the encouragement that comes through the apostles' gospel for as long as is humanly possible in the time available.

Because that's how Christians and churches are strengthened and really encouraged to go on in the face of hardship and persecution. We don't know what he said, but since he'd just written Romans and 1 Corinthians, I guess they got a fairly full exposition of those letters because that was what was uppermost in his mind.

And the result, verse 12? The whole church was not a little encouraged. Just like the not a little disturbance in Ephesus.

What that really means is they were hugely and massively encouraged. Not primarily by the healing of the boy Eutychus, of course, that was a great encouragement to them. But in the glorious gospel hope that Paul expanded to them all night.

And you see Luke's message is very clear. The church needs comfort and strength and hope so the priority must be the constant application of the gospel to the church.

[14 : 34] Paul didn't spend his time when he visited these places showing them his holiday snaps of his travels all around Greece. He didn't regale them with the stories of his travels and all the beaches that he'd seen and all these things.

No, he shared the gospel with them persistently and passionately and personally. And that's why Luke's main focus in this whole chapter now homes in on the whole pattern of Paul's ministry life which he has determined that the church will keep to after he's gone.

So having shown us what he did he now records for us in verse 17 following what Paul said in his farewell address to the Ephesian leaders. And so we have in this third section from verse 17 forward in his own words Paul's exposition of the real gospel pattern for ministry.

What his ministry has been and what their ministry and indeed what our ministries must be if the church today is to remain truly apostolic.

Look at verse 31. really sums it all up. What he says is remember my pattern of ministry what I've shown you what I did in verse 35 in all these things he says I have shown you the path to follow in caring for the weak in caring for God's people.

[16 : 02] And that's his message all through these verses. What I have shown you you are to keep on doing. Now of course it is primarily and obviously a word to church leaders to the elders verse 17 the presbyters.

He also calls them in verse 28 bishops or overseers. These two are the same really in the New Testament it's very clear here and from the pastoral epistles exceptionally clear that the chief qualification and of course the chief duty of that office is that they are teachers they are ministers of the word.

And obviously therefore they've got special responsibility to care for the church the church that's so precious to God. Notice verse 28 this church he says has been obtained by the blood of his own his only begotten son.

But it's not just a word to church leaders it is a word for all Christians. And that's because the New Testament is very clear to us that every one of us is called to care for one another to shepherd one another.

Of course and inevitably in the church there are those who are specially set aside for that role as pastors and teachers. But all of us share that office in a general sense the Bible is very clear on that.

[17 : 18] All of us have a responsibility of pastoral care encouragement of one another. Hebrews tells us we're to stir one another up to love and good works.

We're to encourage one another daily it says. We're to encourage one another and all the more as we see the day of Christ approaching. So let's be absolutely clear. These verses are setting forth a pattern not only for the public ministry of the church's leaders but also for the personal ministry of all the church's members.

And it's a pattern that all of us must follow if the church is going to survive amidst all the struggles of this world. If we're to be truly strengthened if we're to be comforted if we're to be encouraged then in all these things I've shown you says Paul in verse 35 you must put into practice because this is how we help the weak.

This is how we bring encouragement to God's people. So then what kind of ministry whether public or private whether special or general will encourage will instill comfort into real gospel churches and Christian people?

Well if you look you'll see that Luke highlights four things four sections really in this text. It's obvious because of the structure in verses 22 and 25 and verse 32 it each begins with the words and now verse 22 and now behold verse 25 and now behold and then verse 32 again abbreviated and now four sections.

[18 : 58] So the first thing he highlights in verses 18 to 21 is that a ministry that really does encourage and strengthen and care for the church will be a ministry of true gospel grit.

It will be marked by tenacity but also by tenderness. And you think there's most extraordinary tenacity conveyed by these verses verse 19 Paul faced constant trials constant plots against his life and his ministry.

And no doubt he faced also much opposition even within the churches as some people reacted to his challenging words about the implication of the gospel for their lives, turning them away from their pagan ways.

I have no doubt that very often Paul felt like shrinking back. But no, verse 20, he did not shrink. He declared all the word of God's truth.

Everything profitable, he says, however painful that might be. This is my dentist, held back nothing profitable this week as he cleaned the plaque off my teeth with that dreadful machine that makes such a terrible noise and was very, very painful.

[20 : 10] I was scowling at him through my goggles all the way through, but he didn't stop. He held back nothing profitable. I'm jolly glad I don't have to go for another six months, I can tell you. Well, that was Paul.

He didn't watered down his message for anybody. Not for insiders or outsiders, not for Jews or for Greeks, verse 21. All heard the full gospel of faith in the Lord Jesus.

He commended the Savior, but he also, notice, commanded repentance towards God. A turning away from a sinful lifestyle and a turning towards the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those two things always go together or it's not the true gospel. There's no place in Paul's gospel for affirming the sinner and his sin. Paul was as tough as Flint on that point.

Now, that is very hard, isn't it? You know that. We have a great urge, often, when we're trying to witness to people, to soften the challenge, to make the Christian message more appealing, a bit less offensive to our friends, to our colleagues.

[21 : 25] You know that. And it's a very strong urge in the pulpit as well, let me tell you. Not at all easy to have to say things that you know will cause offence.

Things that you know will make people dislike you. You'll see the little snide, sideways comments in the pews sometimes, even during a sermon. the quiet distancing from certain things that you say, even outright hostility at times.

Well, Paul faced plenty of that all the way through his ministry. We've seen that, haven't we? But he didn't flinch, not one iota, verse 20. He held back nothing profitable, but went on publicly and privately teaching and testifying.

As verse 27 says, the whole counsel of God. By the way, notice that that is how Paul is summing up his entire ministry throughout his time in Ephesus.

You read back over Acts chapter 18 and 19, you'll see it was full of drama, full of miracles, all kinds of things. But what Paul was focused on and what he said at heart it was all about was what verse 19 and 20 says, teaching and testifying amidst many trials and with many tears.

[22 : 50] That's what his Ephesian ministry was all about. Here's a comment from one writer. Paul would never be what we would call a popular preacher. He was too painstakingly thorough and radical in proclaiming the message of the cross.

He was prepared to antagonize and alienate his heroes through faithfulness to the very highest. He would not lower the cost of discipleship for any man. many a time he paid dearly for this attitude in hurt and in pain in his sensitive heart.

That tenderness is also evident here, isn't it, alongside that tenacity. Indeed, it's the very tenacity of his ministry that made those tears inevitable. Paul was not a tub-thumping, ranting preacher.

He had real passion, yes, but it was a passion of care for the lives of men and women. And he wouldn't shift from anything that would truly profit them and help them.

Verse 19 says, his manner was full of real humility. We've read many times in his letters, we know just how weak he confessed himself to feel. And it was full, verse 19, of tears aplenty.

[24 : 11] Tears of disappointment and sorrow, no doubt, with some. Perhaps tears of sheer frustration with others. Steely tenacity, immovable in his outward task and yet, at the same time, soft-hearted tenderness, deeply moved, often with real passion.

Friends, that is the kind of real gospel grit that all of us need to have with one another, isn't it? hard heads but soft hearts. Not the other way around.

The tenacity of the faithful friend who won't shrink from wounds, but will profit us and ultimately therefore will encourage us and strengthen us. Yet at the same time, he's full of tenderness, the tenderness of Christ, who will weep with us when we have messed it all up badly and fallen into sin.

That's a ministry that encourages. As will always be a ministry, secondly, that exemplifies the true gospel goal. The determination of that ministry described in verses 18 to 21 is a fruit of the detachment described in verses 22 to 24.

And now behold, says Paul, I'm going. Paul was able to face the huge uncertainty of that journey, not knowing its outcome except that it would certainly include pain and suffering.

[25 : 43] He could face it because at heart he was entirely detached from all the usual preoccupations of our earthly lives. He was focused on a far greater goal, that above all things he should finish well the task that the Lord Jesus had given him.

The only value, he said, of his bodily life to him was that he should use it, as verse 24 says, to finish my course and the ministry that I've received from the Lord Jesus, a ministry of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

And you see, when somebody is motivated by that, they are unstoppable. And also, are they not truly inspirational? How many generations of missionaries have been inspired and moved to devote their own lives to mission through the gospel story of people like Hudson Taylor, who laid aside everything to give his all in the mission fields of China?

Or John Patton, the missionary to the New Hebrides, infested by cannibals. And when before he went, somebody said to him and warned him and said, you'll surely be eaten by cannibals.

He turned to them and said, well, you're getting on in years and you're soon going to be eaten by worms. And if I stay here, I'll surely be eaten by worms. If I go there, maybe I'll be eaten by cannibals. Either way, I'll be eaten and it makes no difference to me as long as I can live and die honoring and serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27 : 14] Isn't that inspirational? Or Jim Elliott, who was indeed killed ministering among the Auka Indians, before he went, said this in his journal, am I ignitable?

God deliver me from the dread asbestos of other things. Make me thy fuel, flame of God. There's nothing, friends, is there, that will instill more courage and comfort and strength and vision than seeing in one another people who scorn the dread asbestos of other things, the comfort and the wealth that we seek, the reputation, the worldly honour we might covet, even physical comfort and ease.

But people who are totally detached from this world's values and this world's valuations and serenely determined to finish their course well.

The true gospel goal. Then verses 25 to 31 surely speak of the necessity of a ministry of real gospel guardianship.

The key words here surely are proclamation and protection, two things that are always vitally related for the church's health. Paul gives us here two pictures of this gospel guardianship.

[28 : 39] The first is of the faithful watchman. And now behold, he says in verse 27, I am innocent of your blood because I've declared to you the whole counsel of God, including that is all its warnings of danger, all its admonitions, all its corrections, all its calls to repentance.

He's a faithful watchman. He's echoing the words of Ezekiel chapter 33 where God talks to his watchman and says, if you fail to warn the people of my real and true coming judgment, then their blood will be upon your head.

You'll be held accountable. But the true guardian of God's people always will warn, however hard that message might be to hear. That's real encouragement and love.

As is the second picture, verse 28, of the faithful shepherd who cares for the precious flock, as Paul did. Notice how he cared, verse 31, again, ceaselessly, night and day, admonishing, warning, teaching the whole counsel of God, protecting through the proclamation of God's word.

And it's always vitally necessary, because of the reality of verses 29 and 30. Look at them. There will be fierce wolves, says Paul, who will do huge harm in the churches.

[30 : 04] And, and here's the rub, they will be so dangerous precisely because they arise, where from? From within the ranks of the professing church itself.

And even among its most popular leaders, people who will lead impressive movements, who will be lauded and have great popular acclaim, verse 30, drawing away many disciples after them. Well, friends, if you read church history right up to the present day, you'll know that it's littered with examples of precisely that.

And Paul says that a ministry that encourages real encouragement, real strength, will not be naive, will not be soft-headed in the face of these threats. It won't say, as some will say, well, now, let it run its course.

We mustn't ever speak against it or criticize it in case it happens to be of God. That is not what Paul says here, verse 31. Be alert, he says. Watch out. Prepare people to recognize these wolves who come in shepherds' clothing and resist them manfully.

Defend the sheep. Defend one another against these things. That's why in Titus 1, verse 9, for example, Paul says that the Christian pastor must not only be able to teach the truth, but must also be able and willing to refute error to those who promote it.

[31 : 32] But that also is a very painful task, a tearful task. And many people shrink from that because they confuse grace with weakness.

They confuse a soft head for a soft heart. But you see, what Paul is saying is that where church leaders shrink from standing up to error, that error will eventually inevitably trample down both them and their churches.

Wolves will not turn into sheep through negotiations and compromise. That's something we need to remember today in our own denomination.

Hence Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians to a ministry of true gospel guardianship that prepares people to see wolves, to see their twisting of the truth, however plausible, however sweetly reasonable it sounds.

And of course it always does sound plausible and sweetly reasonable, otherwise it wouldn't be effective. No wolf comes and says, hello, I'm a wolf. We're to see it for what it is.

[32 : 47] We're not to seek broad coalitions of peace with wolves, but we're to resist them, says Paul, however tearful, however hard that may be for us to do.

But again, you see, notice, that toughness is very far away from being hard-hearted or harsh or unmerciful. It's quite the reverse. There is no contradiction in Paul's mind ever between grace and strength.

So in verses 32 to 35, he speaks so clearly of this genuine ministry as a ministry of gospel grace. Surely the words that sum up these verses are generosity and giving.

And that will always be the dominant note in real Christian ministry, because the real gospel itself is all about God's great generosity, God's great giving through his grace abundantly to us.

Verse 32 is the final and now. And now, he says, I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

[34 : 01] That is the gospel that we commend to the world. And so the pattern of our ministry, one to another, must always reflect that same spirit of gracious gospel giving.

You see that through the whole passage where Paul is expounding the pattern of real gospel ministry. It's all just a reflection, isn't it, of the nature of the gospel itself, of the generous heart of God himself.

We're to mirror our maker and his message in our personal ministries. As Paul did verse 33, I coveted nothing.

By contrast, he gave constantly. He worked hard, he says, but not for himself, verse 34, for others. He gained, in other words, in order to give. Well, of course, because he was a Jesus man who taught him, verse 35, the real blessing comes not in receiving, but in giving.

You know, friends, that is the first grade law, the Christian ministry and service. Unless you've mastered that equation of spiritual maths, you'll never get on any further. Not ever. It's a hard lesson to master.

[35 : 18] It's one of those lessons that only can be learned in the practice of it. It's like riding a bicycle. You can read all about it. You'll only learn how to ride a bicycle by getting on and starting pedaling.

You'll only become a giver in ministry, generously giving gladly to others in all kinds of ways. You'll learn the technique and the joy of it in the doing of it, in becoming a giver, not a taker.

But isn't it true that often we just won't be like that? Because we are so hardwired deep down to be takers, to be gainers, to be covetous.

It's so easy to be resentful in our lives of service for Christ, isn't it? Whether you're in Christian ministry full time or whether you're not. It's so easy for your heart to be full of things like well, what do I get out of my church?

What are they doing for me? Can you imagine the Lord Jesus saying that on the road to Jerusalem or carrying his cross? What am I getting out of these people? It's so easy to covet, isn't it?

[36 : 34] Other people's gold or apparel or their position, their authority or their influence, even in the church. To be driven to seek those things so that those are the things that motivate actually all that you do.

It's very easy if you're in full time Christian ministry to see it just as a job. Well, I'll do this because it will be good on my CV for the future. What will be resentful in your heart?

Well, I jolly well ought to get a lot more pay and perks for what I do. Look at how much I do. Paul says real ministry is all about generosity, all about joyful giving because the real gospel is all about generosity and God's joyful gracious giving to us.

We are servants, verse 32, of the word of his grace which builds up, which gives the riches that are ours in Christ, the inheritance among the saints.

And friends, you and I will never be real ministers of grace, real servants of Christ if we covet gold or silver or fine clothes or fine living or status in the church because the spirit of Christ and the spirit of covetousness cannot coexist in your heart or in mind.

[38 : 05] That's why Paul warns in the pastoral epistles not to have leaders who are lovers of money because they can't be genuine shepherds. And it's just the same here. You see, it's the wolves, isn't it, who are the takers.

They're the people who draw people after them to give them a boost to their egos. They're the ones who lead people away from the truth and exploit them for gain. But real ministry is the absolute opposite.

Real ministry gives. It doesn't prey on the weak. Helps and nurtures the weak. Knows that it's more blessed to give than to receive.

Have we discovered that yet? Have you? Well, says Paul in verse 35, in all these things I've shown you the way, as Christ himself showed me the way.

an exposition of the real gospel pattern. Lives and ministries, one with another, that will truly encourage, instill courage and strength and commitment in one another as we seek to follow him.

[39 : 16] Friends, if we do live like that with one another, surely we too will know something of the depth and the passion in our relationships that are exhibited in these last few verses, 36 to 38.

If you wanted another heading for these verses, surely it would be this, the evidence of real gospel partnership. It's a picture, isn't it, of deep love and care and fellowship and loyalty and unity and prayer.

He knelt down and prayed with them all and there was much weeping. They embraced, they kissed. There's nothing whatsoever dry and stilted produced by this kind of steely ministry of proclamation and teaching and warning and admonition, is there?

Not a bit of it. It's a wash with tears. It's exactly the reverse. It's a fellowship united in the love of the Saviour and bound so in the loyalty to the Saviour and to his mission that although there was deep sorrow amid their Christian joy at such a parting from a loved one, so also there was clearly deep joy amid that sorrow of parting as they all set him off together on that great journey to Rome, united with him in that wonderful calling.

That's what the pattern of this man's ministry produced. Let's ask God together, shall we, that these encouraging priorities of Paul's parting words would help us to bear fruit likewise as we minister to one another in this year ahead.

[40 : 59] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that you have shown us the way of strength, of encouragement, of steadfastness in your way of truth.

We thank you that it is a way of wonderful grace, of great giving, of cherishing generosity.

Help us, we pray, following this pattern of the Apostle Paul even as he has led us in the way of our Lord Jesus Christ. For we ask it in his name.

Amen.