

The Beating Heart of Gospel Ministry

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to read this evening, and Paul Brennan is beginning a new little series in the Acts of the Apostles. He's been going through Acts in bits and pieces over a long period of time, but we're coming back to it this evening, and we're going to read together from Acts chapter 20, reading the whole chapter, although Paul's focus will mostly be on the second half of the chapter.

But we pick up the story after the rioting and the great opposition that Paul met to his ministry in Ephesus.

If that's unfamiliar to you, then during the offering you can perhaps read back over that. But that's why chapter 20 begins after the uproar.

After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, that is the Christians in Ephesus. And after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia.

And these few verses here compress an awful lot of geographical travel and quite a lot of time. Macedonia is where Corinth is, and actually Paul, when he passed through there, wrote 2 Corinthians.

[1 : 1 7] The year was about AD 56. When he'd gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. And he spent three months there.

And when a plot was made against them by the Jews, by the way, he was writing to the epistle to the Romans at that point. A plot was made against them by the Jews. As he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia.

So Pater of Berea and the son of Pyrrhus from Berea accompanied him and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus, Gaius of Derbe and Timothy, and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus.

These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas. But we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread. And in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days.

On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day. And he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered, and a young man named Eutychus sitting at the window sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer.

[2 : 3 4] And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down and bent over him, taking him up in his arms, said, Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.

And Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten. He conversed with them a long while until daybreak. And so departed. And they took away the youth alive and were not a little comforted, encouraged.

But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. When he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mytilene.

And sailing from there, we came the following day opposite Chios. The next day, we touched at Samos. And the day after that, we went to Miletus. For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia.

For he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

[3 : 45] And when they came to him, he said to them, For you yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility, with tears, and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

How I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks, of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

But I do not count my life of any value, nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

And I behold, I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will see my face again.

[5 : 02] Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

To care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

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.

I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who are with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way, we must help the weak.

[6 : 22] And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, it's more blessed to give than to receive. When he said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

And there was much weeping on the part of all. They embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful, most of all because of the word he'd spoken, that they would not see his face again.

And they accompanied him to the ship. Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, good evening folks.

And please do turn back to Acts chapter 20. Do have that in front of you. And as Willie mentioned, we're going to focus particularly on the second half and there from verse 17 to the end of the chapter, which is Paul's last words to that church from Ephesus.

Those church leaders, they came down to see him there by the coast. And these are his parting words, his last words to these church leaders. And there's always a special poignancy, isn't there, to last words, to parting words.

[7 : 39] On the trivial end, when I'm leaving the house and my parting words to my children, obey your mother, stop skydiving from the top bunk, that sort of thing, there's a special poignancy to those final words.

More seriously, I can think back to some teachers from school. When teachers retired, they had their 10 minutes at the front of the school and they would dispatch their parting words.

And there were always moments of real tenderness and emotion and the imparting of some sort of distilled wisdom, some key reflections from their time as a teacher. And it's parting words that we have here recorded in Acts chapter 20.

And these are words full of tenderness and emotion, aren't they? Look at the very end, verses 37 and 38. There was much weeping on the part of all. They embraced Paul and kissed him.

This was a really tender moment, a moment full of meaning and emotion for these folk who'd spent the last few years living together, working alongside each other, sharing the gospel together.

[8 : 49] And these are very, very significant words, not just for the Apostle Paul, not just for the Ephesian church, those leaders he was speaking to, but also for us, for Christians down through the ages.

They are significant words. And they're significant not just because they are the only long speech in Acts directly addressed to Christians.

Every other major speech is actually addressed to the outsider, to those who are not yet believing. But here is one of the longest speeches we have, one of the only ones we have, addressed to Christians.

Christians. And these words are not just significant because they're words of great tenderness and affection to people that Paul knew so well. They're significant not just because these would be his last words to this particular group of people.

But they're also significant because of their content. With these words, Paul is unpacking what real gospel ministry is all about.

[9 : 51] He is unpacking his own heart to reveal what is the very center of his gospel work. He shares with them his own pattern of gospel ministry which is to be their pattern of gospel ministry and ours.

He is sharing with them his great gospel priorities which are to be their priorities and also ours. He answers some fundamental questions for us.

What is church all about? What are we as a church really meant to give ourselves to? What are we all about?

What are our priorities? Given all the things that we could do as a church, what are the things that we must do? And must we keep doing? Well, Paul gives us answers to all these fundamental questions here.

I'm going to look at the speech of Paul's under two broad areas. First, as he shares his own example with those church leaders and then second as he gives instructions to them.

[10 : 59] He's giving these instructions to church people, but particularly church leaders. So his example and then his instruction. And these two things, his example and his instruction, are inextricably linked.

His instruction is fundamentally that they would copy his example, that they would follow him and do as he's done. You see, the ministry for the Ephesian leaders, it will look very much like the ministry that Paul himself has modeled for them.

Ministry for us will look very much like the sort of ministry that Paul was modeling here. He's not calling them or us to a different sort of thing.

Not at all. Paul's pattern for what church work looks like was going to be their pattern but also ours. So we'll look first at Paul's example.

Paul shares his model of ministry which is an example to be followed. Paul talks about his own ministry here. About what he did when he was with them in order that they would be crystal clear about what he did and why he did it so that they would keep on with that once he was no longer there.

- [12 : 19] Paul was no longer going to be with them. Having spent several years with them that was gone now. He was on his way. What were they going to do? Well, Paul's example was to be their example.

And his example could be summed up by some of the words that we read here in this chapter. Paul's example amounted to this. teaching and testifying in the midst of trials and tears.

That was what Paul was all about. Teaching and testifying in the midst of trials and tears. He talks about what he does. Teaching and testifying. He talks about how he did it in the midst of trials and tears.

So what does he do firstly? Well, Paul was all about the message. he taught. He testified. We'll look at all the references to that in the speech in a moment.

But just notice that this is the very baseline of Paul's ministry all the time. Not just there in Ephesus but wherever he goes. Look back at the first half of the chapter which Willie read for us earlier and notice all the references to Paul's speech.

- [13 : 31] Look at verse 1. Paul sent for the disciples and after encouraging them he was speaking to them encouraging them. Verse 2 he had given them much encouragement.

Verse 7 Paul talked with them and he prolonged his speech. He spoke all the way through the evening past midnight until daybreak.

I might do that this evening see how we go. Look at verse 11 or verse 9 even. Paul's talk still longer.

Verse 11 he conversed. It's all about what he says. He's a man all about speaking communicating something. And now notice what Paul says to the Ephesian elders here as he sums up his own time with them in Ephesus.

Look at verse 20. Here's how he summarizes his time with them. How I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house testifying both to Jews and Greeks.

- [14 : 38] Look at the end of verse 24 to testify to the gospel into verse 25 I've gone about proclaiming. Verse 27 I did not shrink from declaring to you.

Do you see what it's all about? Proclaiming testifying declaring speaking at the center of what Paul did wherever he went was to communicate a message to teach and to testify.

That is at the very center of gospel ministry then and today. It's unchanged. The very heart of it remains the same. And it's just what Jesus told his disciples to do way back at the beginning of Acts chapter 1 verse 8 Jesus told them you are to be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.

You are to be those who testify about me and what I've done. You see our task is primarily that of communicating communicating a message.

And that is why the Bible and communicating its message is front and center of all that we do as a church. From the life course to Christianity explored to our Sunday services to our youth work to our student work at the heart of everything you'll find the same thing.

- [15 : 53] Communication of a message. But what is the message that Paul communicated? What is the message by implication that we are also to communicate?

Well Paul tells us look at verse 21 Paul says that he was testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's the same message regardless of who he's speaking to isn't it? Both to Jews and to Greeks the message is the same and it's the message he's proclaimed everywhere he's gone.

It's the same thing everywhere he goes. It's a message that calls for repentance and faith. Way back in Acts chapter 2 Peter on the day of Pentecost he calls all those who are hearing him to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

Later on Acts chapter 26 Paul himself before King Agrippa says that he declared first to those in Damascus then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea and Samaria and also to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God.

[17 : 20] All the way through the book of Acts it's the same. Same message same implications and what Paul was doing there in Ephesus was not just sharing a few nice ideas a few things to tickle the intellect no it was a message with massive implications.

His was a message as it was all the way through the book of Acts and remains so for the church today it's a message about Jesus Christ the one promised in the scriptures Jesus Christ fully God fully man who lived and died on a cross and rose again who promised forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all who would repent and turn to him and trust in him.

That is the core of Paul's gospel message. And it's a message that demanded a response a message that would transform lives for all eternity and it's a message that provokes some would respond in belief and it did that in Ephesus people turned followed the Lord Jesus but many were opposed and Willie was hinting at that wasn't he when he referred us back to Acts chapter 19 with that riot things kicked off in a big way in Ephesus that gospel is a message that provokes and it provokes responses then and today and we are to proclaim that same message that Paul proclaimed that is what Paul's all about a message about the Lord Jesus Christ and calling for the response turn believe in Jesus now forgiveness and eternal life now for many here this evening that will seem obvious of course it's about a message of course that's what we're all about surely those gathered there with Paul would have known that as well yes the message that's a given of course but Paul really draws attention to it here as he's speaking to these leaders these last words with these church leaders he keeps talking about his message and how he went about it here is the heartbeat of my ministry says Paul and it's all about communicating this message about Jesus

Christ why the need to reiterate it why keep going on about it surely that's a given surely these guys know it well he reiterates it I think perhaps because it's very unimpressive what he's calling them to do is not impressive or glamorous it doesn't look powerful and easy for them to be drawn by something that looks more spectacular it's a simple message that he's asking them to keep telling it's not very spectacular so that's partly why he's drawing attention to I think but also because this message has this tendency to provoke opposition when the heat comes when the pressure comes the temptation will be to go silent won't it to stop talking to stop sharing the message don't do that says Paul keep on with the message you've seen me do it keep on with it keep going because through it despite the fact that it looks very ordinary despite the fact that it draws opposition it is the way in which men and women boys and girls hear about the message of Jesus hear about the forgiveness of sins and can know eternal life it's the only way people can be saved only through this message and so that is why

Paul keeps drawing attention to it only through this message will the gospel go forward will the church be built it's the only way people can be saved and that is what Paul did that was his example wherever he went teaching testifying proclaiming declaring so we see what Paul did but we also see how he did it how does he go about it well Paul teaches and testifies and he does it with tears and in the midst of trials this speech here in Acts 20 is an incredible insight into Paul's heart we see what drove him what it cost him to share this life-giving message look at verse 19 here's how he describes how he went about that work serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the

[22 : 26] Jews he did not shirk suffering he did not shrink from teaching the whole counsel of God his was not a glamorous ministry it was not a glamorous ministry it was not a ministry emblazoned with his own name this was not Apostle Paul International Ministries all the razzmatazz and glamour and travel not that at all it was not about Paul it was a ministry conducted in the midst of trials and tears his was a ministry full of hard graft and tough things and tears two things particularly we see first he didn't shirk from suffering that has been one of the hallmarks of Paul's ministry all the way through if you can think back to previous things we've looked at in Acts again and again and again Paul meets opposition and hardship he meets on the one hand of course glad acceptance many people turn gladly receive the gospel but on the other hand he is met with opposition and even threats on his life and he is prepared for more look at verse 22 he knows that he must head to

Jerusalem and he's saying I don't know exactly what's going to happen to me there but I do know verse 23 that in every city imprisonments and inflictions await me everywhere he goes he knows what's coming and yet he's still prepared to go would you go would I go Paul was prepared to go because he treasured the gospel he proclaimed more than he treasured his own safety he treasured that gospel more than his own life is that our mentality I wonder is it yours is it mine is it your conviction that there is nothing more valuable in the whole universe than knowing Christ is it your conviction there is nothing more important for the people I live next to than to know and repent and turn to Jesus is it your conviction the gospel is more valuable than your own comfort and convenience is that your conviction do you treasure the gospel more than your own safety your own popularity your own standing your own reputation do I treasure the gospel more than those things my own safety my own popularity my own security my own comfort

I think it's clear what the apostle Paul would answer to those questions he did not shirk suffering but secondly he didn't shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God either his was a ministry marked by a steely determination to say what needed to be said even if it's going to be hard to hear twice we have this little phrase I did not shrink from declaring to you it's there in verse 20 and again in verse 27 I did not shrink from declaring to you in public but also in private Paul pressed home Bible truth the time he would have spent not just in his regular public teaching but then going from house to house speaking to individuals and families and not shrinking from saying the hard things

Paul didn't pull his punches he didn't just say what folk wanted to hear look at verse 31 there were times when he was brought to tears because of the things he had to say and because of his tender love for those dear Christians in Ephesus verse 31 therefore be alert remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears that is the mark of Paul's ministry not shrinking from saying the difficult things and that is the mark of a pastor following in Paul's footsteps that sort of leader whether it be a church leader or growth group leader or leader in the home that sort of leader will teach you the bits of the Bible you like and also the bits you don't like and the bits that they don't like either those bits in the

Bible which are challenging which call you to repent which are taught in the midst of tears it is a good thing a necessary thing to have church leaders who will be prepared to say what needs to be said to preach the whole counsel of God even in the midst of tears sometimes that is a mark of a pastor following in Paul's footsteps that was Paul's pattern there in Ephesus these leaders he's speaking to here they would have known that themselves they would have sat with him as he did just that tell them the hard things they knew it they'd received it they'd seen it with their own eyes they knew that Paul left it all out in the field nothing was left unsaid he didn't shrink from teaching the whole counsel of God well there's Paul's example we see what he did teaching and testifying and we see how he did it through trials and through tears but why did Paul need to draw attention to his example you might think it's a bit egocentric talking about himself not at all

[28 : 40] Paul points to his own example here because Christian ministry is in many ways counterintuitive the key things he keeps driving home are very unimpressive Paul knows this is likely the very last time he's going to see these dear Ephesian church leaders and by laying out his example like this he wants them to do likewise to follow his example to teach to testify but do that in the midst of trials and tears and that is not especially exciting or glamorous or impressive is it but it is what it took for Paul and for all who would follow him and we need that example don't we if Paul merely said here's what you need to do it's going to be really tough it's going to involve trials and tears and tough things I'm not sure they would do it but because he's pointing to his own example here's what

I did you do the same as me he's not calling to do anything different it's helpful isn't it to see examples having an example like that it helps us it would have helped them just seeing somebody who's been through it and done it and is calling you to follow in the same way it makes the task more doable isn't it that is why we're not to live in isolation as Christians we need each other we need the example of other people don't we other Christians and that's why we place such emphasis here in the church on rubbing shoulders with each other in our ministry training programs whether it's the apprenticeship or ministers and training they are working alongside others more senior folk watching their example following in their footsteps as they follow in Paul's so there's Paul's example that's the first thing he says to these dear leaders there in

Ephesus but the second thing he does is to give instructions so that's our second thing this evening more briefly looking particularly there from verse 28 Paul's instruction to the church and especially to church leaders so Paul turns there directly to those leaders verse 28 and he says to them pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock and he tells them to pay attention to two things they are to pay careful attention to themselves and to pay careful attention to the flock why four things one God has made them overseers God has made them overseers look at verse 28 the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God this is a God given work for the care of God's flock the flock does not belong to the overseers to the elders

Paul uses various different words here for church leaders but the flock the church do not belong to those leaders they are God's sheep look at verse 28 they are to care for the church of who of God so those in leadership those who've been given the task of caring for the church of God they must pay careful attention to themselves so that they are generally caring for the flock as under shepherds as those who are pointing not to themselves but to the great shepherd himself the Lord Jesus Christ so that's their task they've been given this job secondly they're a flock the church is described as a flock and the Bible often speaks of the church like a flock there's lots of shepherding language in the Bible and it's helpful to think in what sense is the imagery of the flock being used here it's quite hard for us isn't it to imagine farming life we're so used to urban living but as I understand it there is a hit

TV show on at the moment all about this sort of thing it's called our Yorkshire farm it follows the Owen family their nine children yes nine children as they tend their flocks of hundreds of sheep and you see the realities so I've been told I've not seen it yet myself but you see the realities of what it's like to look after a flock of sheep and it's hard work sheep need a lot of care and protection and guidance sheep follow each other around don't they if you ever see them in the field they're not the brightest animals in the farmyard they're vulnerable to attack and that is one of the ways in which the Bible pictures us the church we are like a flock of sheep we need led and we need protectors and so the church leaders are to keep a careful watch over themselves and the flock because they're a flock they need looked after and they need protected so

[34 : 02] God's made them overseers they're a flock third they're precious to God look at the end of verse 28 care for the church of God which he obtained with his own blood God's people are infinitely precious to him he sent his own son to die on a cross in order to bring people into his eternal family that was what he was willing to pay for you for his church it's a very high price to pay but he paid it God's church God treasures his church and each individual within his church which is why he has placed people to care for them he has put people in positions of leadership as shepherds as elders as pastors so as each individual Christian each sheep is cared for and looked after each one of you is precious to God so

God has put them in charge they're a flock they're incredibly precious to him but fourthly here's the crux they are susceptible to attack from outside and within this is why Paul is warning these leaders here is why Paul is telling these church leaders to pay careful attention to themselves and to the flock verses 29 and 30 he says I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them now these are words that are really very very shocking indeed aren't they and unless these words were in black and white in front of us I'm not sure we really believe that Paul could say such a thing is he the apostle

Paul really concerned that the church he spent years with teaching and training even through tears could really be in danger well yes just look again at verse 29 he knows that folk are going to come in fierce wolves will come in not sparing the flock from among your own selves will arise those who are going to drag others away does that shock you it shocks me it scares me Paul anticipates attack from outside but also from within it's hard to believe isn't it if ever there was a church that was going to be strong and stable it was going to be that one they spent years with the apostle Paul doesn't get much better than that does it and yet he knows that almost as soon as he goes the attacks will come from among the men that

Paul himself has trained there in Ephesus people who had rubbed shoulders with him for years leaders who Paul put in place some of them will at some stage he says seek to draw after themselves a little following it's deeply sobering isn't it and the reason he has to warn is because these guys don't look like wolves there was no outward indication hence the strength of Paul's warning if Paul didn't say this they would never believe it the people he's talking about here would be nice guys able teachers respected attractive personalities able to draw a following which is why they are so dangerous which is why Paul warns in the way he does here such strong terms be alert he says be discerning watch yourselves watch your own lives watch out for those who are building their own following watch out for those who are just beginning to drift away from the truth of the

Bible it's so hard when that happens in reality it's almost hard to comprehend isn't it but when I've spoken with church leaders who've experienced this sort of thing a wolfish elder who has dragged away countless families called splits in the church they say things to me like this they say you'd never guess it you'd never guess if you met this guy that he'd be capable of doing that he's just so nice unless you've actually received those emails you never believe what's really going on here it happens it's hard to believe and so we need to heed Paul's warning especially those who are in church leadership I tremble as I read this and as I preach this what's the remedy well verse 31 therefore be alert remembering that for three years

[39 : 34] I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears the remedy is Paul's example it's what he's been talking about what we've looked at in the first half of this sermon keep doing what Paul did teaching and testifying enduring trials and doing it through tears that is the task of anyone in leadership in the church they've got to keep on with that task whether it's Willie or me or Josh or Phil or those leading release the words or those teaching Sunday school anyone who is teaching in any capacity they've got to keep on with that core task teaching and testifying enduring trials and doing it with tears we're to keep on with teaching the Bible all of the Bible the bits we like and the bits we don't pressing it home through tears that's the remedy

Paul gives follow my example and verse 32 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 stick close to God I commend you to God and to the word of his grace stick close to God and to his word these are the apostles parting words for a church that he dearly loved and they are words that we need to hear today aren't they all of us especially church leaders are to stick close to our great shepherd the Lord Jesus Christ and to stick close to his words that is what will keep us safe and secure now and for all eternity what are we about

Tron church we're about teaching and testifying and doing it through trials and in the midst of tears we are to stick close to God and stick close to his word that will keep us secure let me pray shall I and then we'll sing our closing hymn father these are serious and sober words but Lord how we need to hear them so please would you help us all of us church leaders church members each one of us help us to keep on following Paul's example give us the courage to share the gospel to be willing to share every part of your word and to be willing to endure the trials and the tears that may come Lord how we need your help so please by your spirit help each one of us for we ask it in

Jesus name Amen e huh you