

The setting of our reading from the Book of Acts was 25 years after the Cross and the Resurrection. Paul was on his 3rd and final missionary journey. He anticipated that his end was near. And so he wanted to encourage the people in their walk with God, that they would carry on faithfully despite his absence. That's what we're going to talk about this morning, and what this means for us in our walk with God and with one another.

PRAYER

READ Acts 20:17-35

Now from Miletus he (Paul) sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the Kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

²⁸ 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. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. 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. ³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

We read, **Acts 20:17**, "Now from Miletus he (Paul) sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him."

Paul was sailing to Jerusalem, for a festival, as we learn in the preceding passage. On his way he sailed to Ephesus, a coastal city. Because he was the founder of the church there, he wanted to stop and provide a word of encouragement to the people. However, there had been a riot there when he preached a year earlier. For the sellers of idols of the goddess Artemis realized that their trade was going to dry up if they didn't stop this guy from making everyone into Christians.

So instead of going into the city, Paul had the pastors of the church come to him in the harbor. When they'd gathered around him, he said,

Acts 20:18-21

You yourselves know how I LIVED among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia,

¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews;

²⁰ how I did not shrink from DECLARING to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house,

²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of REPENTANCE toward God and of FAITH in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul told the pastors about two things which laid the foundation for his ministry. He talked about **"how (he) lived,"** which was serving the Lord in humility and his fellow man with compassion despite the persecution he experienced. And he talked about how he **"did not shrink from declaring"** the Gospel, which was, first, **"repentance toward God,"** and, second, **"faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."**

I have a pastor-friend who was once an engineer. He built rockets for NASA. He liked to say, "Paul's message is not rocket science. I know, because I used to be a rocket scientist!" Indeed, this message is so simple a child can understand it. But it is a power-filled message which transforms our lives. Paul said,

Acts 20:22-27

AND NOW, BEHOLD, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there,²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to THE GOSPEL OF THE GRACE OF GOD.

²⁵ AND NOW, BEHOLD, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the KINGDOM will see my face again.

**²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you,
²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD.**

Twice Paul said, **“And now behold,”** which is another way of saying, “Look! See! Listen! This is really important! So give me your full attention!”

Paul told the pastors he was going to Jerusalem **“constrained by the Spirit.”** In other places the Greek word for “constrained” is translated, “bound, “tied up, and “compelled.” In other words, while he anticipated “imprisonment” at the hands of men, Paul already thought of himself as tied up, bound to God himself.

But this was not a bad thing, this binding by God. I know, this is sunny Southern California and we can hardly bear the idea of being told by anyone, even God Himself, what to do, let alone being bound or tied up by them!

But the binding Paul talked about was an alternative to another kind of bondage that will kill us. Paul wrote elsewhere, **Titus 3:3, “we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, SLAVES to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.”**

So that’s one way to live, which I’m sure we’re all familiar with, whether from personal experience or observation. But Paul also wrote, **Galatians 5:13, “For you were called to FREEDOM, brothers. Only do not use your FREEDOM as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love SERVE one another.”**

We were once slaves to sin and the devil. But now because of Jesus, we are free, and with that freedom we’ve bound ourselves to God that we might **“through love serve one another.”**

Did you ever think about it that way, that we, by our association as Christian brothers and sisters, have made ourselves slaves to one another, serving one another with love? Elsewhere Paul commands us to outdo one another with good works (Romans 12:10). That’s what he was talking about.

Paul said, **“I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself.”** Why? Because he died, and he was raised to a new life through this message which he

preached, **“the Gospel of the grace of God.”** For Paul, if there was no Jesus, there was no life. But with Jesus, life abounds all the more!

Paul said, **“Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you,²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD” (Acts 20:26f).**

Because Paul knew he would not return to the church in Ephesus again, he was freeing himself from any further responsibility to it. That’s what he meant when he said, “I am innocent of the blood of all of you.” In other words, it was now up to the pastors to do their job. Paul said he had declared “the whole counsel of God.” Now it was their turn to do the same.

The whole counsel of God according to Paul was repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. That was it. That’s it. Keep it simple, keep it clean, keep it centered on Jesus. This is not rocket science. Paul said,

Acts 20:28-31

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.

²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

³¹ Therefore BE ALERT, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

With these words, Paul showed the pastors the full extent of their ministry. First, he told them to stay on target with their teaching with the whole counsel of God, and now he’s warning them to watch out for the wolves, those killers of the Christian faith who **“will come in among you”** and who are already **“among your own selves,” “men speaking twisted things.”**

This was an important warning in Paul’s time but also in our time. For there are false teachers everywhere in all forms in the media inside the Christian church. The way I discern between wolves and fellow sheep is to ask questions like, Is the message about Jesus or are they talking about something else? Do they promote sacrificial acts of service which they themselves participate in, or are they promoting something else? Are they

humble and compassionate or are they something else? A five year old child knows the difference between the work and heart of Jesus and a conman. This is not rocket science.

Paul said, **Acts 20:32, “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.”**

“**The Word of His grace**” builds up. God’s love for us in Christ is “**the Word of His grace.**” Our love for one another is rooted in this love. In other words, the more deeply we grasp God’s love for us, the more deeply we love one another, becoming a reflection of our Lord Jesus, little Christ’s, as it were.

Paul said, **Acts 20:33-35, “I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'”**

Paul’s lifestyle reflected what he believed. One of our problems as Christians in America is our affluence. After all, if you have everything you need, why do you need Jesus? But our lives betray us. We don’t obey God, living in a state of repentance and love for God. This is a state of cognitive dissonance, believing one thing but doing another. But for Paul there was a complete consistency between what he believed and how he lived.

Friends in Christ, may the message of Jesus, the Word of His grace, be your word, for that is the same Word that forgave you for your sins, blessed you with eternity, and made you an heir to the Kingdom of God.

May you be alert to the “**fierce wolves**” who would like to steal away the joy you have in Jesus.

May you be “**constrained by the Spirit**” to live the Word, loving your neighbor as your self, being generous to a fault, being merciful toward one another for the sake of this Word which has already transformed you.

And may you have the opportunity to share the Good News of the whole counsel of God with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. After all, it’s not rocket science. Amen.