BE SHEPHERDS OF GOD’S FLOCK

Acts 20:1-38

Key Verse: 20:28

**“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”**

This passage describes Paul’s third missionary journey. His farewell address to the Ephesian elders is the focus of the passage. When someone delivers a farewell message, we can hear the summary of his life—his value, purpose and hope. Especially Paul in his message gives a spiritual direction for church leaders to be shepherds of God’s flock. May God bless today’s passage to learn about Paul’s life of mission and the life as a shepherd.

**I. Through Macedonia, Greece and Troas (1-12)**

When the riot in Ephesus ended, Paul sent for the disciples. He encouraged them to keep on preaching the gospel of Jesus. Then he said goodbye to them and set out for Macedonia. As he traveled through that area, he spoke many words of encouragement to the people (2). Finally, he arrived in Greece where he stayed three months (3). Those regions were pioneered during his second missionary journey. Now we see the pattern of Paul’s missionary journey. Once he arrived in a certain city or town, he focused on preaching and teaching ministry to establish a church of God. When Paul left for other cities, the remaining leaders served the newly established church. Paul always had in mind to visit them back to encourage their faith. This was how he had served the first, second and third missionary journeys. Paul was eager to reach out to unbelieving cities and countries with the gospel. He was also eager to revisit God’s people to strengthen and encourage their faith. God’s flock of sheep was always in Paul’s mind and whenever he had a chance to visit, he spent time with them with many words of encouragement. In that sense, we can characterise Paul’s ministry as the ministry of encouragement. As we had learned from the book of James, the Christian life involves suffering, endurance and patience. The Church as a whole, needs to be mutually encouraged. Since the pandemic broke out, we have not been gathering in the church for a long time. How have all of you been doing? I am missing all of you from my heart. Let us show our affection to our brothers and sisters in all circumstances. Let us also share the words of encouragement to one another to stay connected in Christ.

While Paul was traveling European churches during his third trip, he collected relief offerings to deliver to the Jerusalem church. Paul was concerned with the church in Jerusalem for they were having financial difficulty. So he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost. The fastest way to get there was to get on board of a ship. But he learned that some Jews were plotting to kill him on the sea. So he decided to go back through Macedonia (3). Look at verse 4. **“He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia.”** These traveling companions of Paul were the representatives of the churches Paul had planted among the gentiles. They also donated relief offerings for the Jerusalem church. What an encouraging work of God it would be when Paul introduces the Gentile Christian leaders and the relief offerings from their churches. By bringing them, Paul wanted to share God’s vision of world salvation work with Jewish Christians.

Now Paul and his journey team came to Troas. The church met on the first day of the week, that is Sunday, to break bread (7). Paul delivered a passionate message to them, because he was leaving the next day. His message was long. They were tired. But they were eager to hear the word of life from Paul. But not everyone was eager to listen. Look at verse 9 “**Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead.”**

It was potentially a disastrous moment for Paul. A young man fell asleep during the worship and fell to the ground from the third story and was found to be dead. Paul stopped speaking and went down to see him. But he did not panic. Paul, again receiving the gift of faith from God, sensed that God would raise this boy from the dead. Paul said “Don’t be alarmed. He’s alive” (10). Look at verse 11. **“Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight. He left”** Unexpected tragedy couldn’t stop Paul’s passion to preach. From that evening till the daylight, Paul preached more than 10 hours. Meanwhile God raised Eutychus from the dead and people were greatly comforted.

Paul’s original plan to go back to Jerusalem was being delayed. However Paul didn’t stop worshipping and preaching throughout his journey on top of his enemies’ evil plots and tragic events. Paul was driven by the passion to share the words of God and he was preparing the last farewell message to the elders of the Ephesian church.

**II. Be shepherds of the church of God (13-38)**

Look at verse **16 “Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.”** Though Paul knew he couldn't make a brief visit to Ephesus, he still wanted to pour his heart into the leaders of the church at Ephesus. So, from Miletus, he called for the elders of the church to come for a special meeting.

Verses 18-35 describe his farewell to them. He knew that this was thelast time he would speak to them in person. His farewell was both a personal testimonyand a charge to the elders. Here I would like think about his summon in three points.

**First, I served the Lord with great humility and with tears.**

Look at verse 19. **“I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents.”** Paul’s ministry in Ephesus is well described in Chapter 19. Paul labored for three years to discuss the words of God with his Bible students in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. He served intense Bible study for three years as he served the Lord. Our effort and labor to serve God’s people through Bible studies, fishing and spiritual fellowship is all about serving our Lord Jesus. Paul did serve the Lord and God’s people with great humility and with tears. Why do you think Paul needed to be very humble with tears? As I read Paul’s letters, I realize that Paul truly regarded his Bible students as spiritual children. Galatians 4:19 says, **“My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you…”** and 1 Corinthians 4:15 says, **“Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.”**

Parents love their children wishing all the best for them. Even if they do wrong many times, their parents forgive them again and again. Parents also patiently discipline their children until they grow mature and stable in the aspects of spiritual and social life. Honestly, I didn’t really shed tears for my children but my wife shed many tears as she disciplined my three children. As we see from Galatians 4:19, Paul served God’s people as if he was bearing pains of childbirth until Christ was formed in his disciples. Here I like the way he expressed in raising spiritual children; **“until Christ was formed in them.”** Paul put tremendous effort until sinners turn their hearts to God by declaring the message of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus as verse 21 reads. The faith with repentance and practical obedience are real faith that saves sinners’ souls. It is definitely not easy to help people until they repent of their sins and have true faith in Jesus. To Paul, the only way to serve God’s children was to serve them with great humility and with many tears. Paul’s humility and tears had been the fertilizer for God’s church to be firmly established and to grow wherever Paul went. Learning from Paul, let us serve the Lord and God’s children with humility and tears so that God may grow his people until Christ is formed in their character and in their life.

**Second, My aim is to finish the race.**

Look at verses 22-23. **“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.”** Paul did not know what was ahead of him in Jerusalem. The Spirit warned him that prison and hardships were waiting for him. Paul received a warning not to compromise to cancel his journey to Jerusalem but to keep moving forward to where the Spirit of God leads him to go. In our selfish nature, we tend to interpret signs of God for our own desires and benefits. But Paul considered the will of the Spirit first and kept moving on to do the will of God no matter what situation he faces.

Look at verse 24. **However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.** Paul’s ultimate value which is more valuable than his own life was to complete the task the Lord Jesus has given him—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace. Paul thought of himself as a runner who had a race to finish, and nothing would keep Paul from finishing the race. Currently I watched a video clip of the high school girls’ 400 meter run final in Korea. A girl had dominant racing skill over all other competitors. At the final round, all runners gave up their race knowing that she would win. She was the only one who ran the race on the track. Yet, she did her best to complete the race. In the interview, she said, “I had a clear goal to break the Korean record, and so it kept me running at full speed.”

The person who has a life’s goal to achieve does his best to pursue his goal regardless of situations or people around him. Paul had received a God-given task which was his life’s goal to testify the good news of God’s grace. When God calls us to be his children, he always calls us with his promise to fulfill. Let us examine ourselves whether we pursue the tasks that God has given us or not. Let us be in the race and keep running to testify the grace of Jesus even in this pandemic situation.

**Third, be shepherds of the church of God.**

Let us read together verse 28. **“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”** In Ephesus, Paul was a great preacher and a Bible teacher. He was a disciple maker. Most of all, he was a shepherd. Now he charged the elders to be shepherds of the church of God. So what does it mean to be a shepherd for God’s church? First, a shepherd must keep watch over himself. A shepherd is different from a cowboy. A good shepherd must lead the way for his sheep, not drive them from behind with a whip. He must set a good example for his sheep. A shepherd must keep watch over himself through daily repentance before the word of God and prayer.

Second, a shepherd must watch over the sheep to make sure they do not stray from the green pastures and to protect them from predators. When I think about a shepherd who watches over the flock of sheep, I have the following image in my mind. All kinds of wild animals gather around a small pond to drink water in African safari. Predators know that this would be the best opportunity to devour their victims and they stay hidden near their preys. The herds of deer, impala and hog come to the pond very cautiously to drink water. While drinking, their eyes and ears are busy to check the surroundings, and they quickly stop drinking and run away when they sense the predator’s presence. However, a flock of sheep come to the pond and they jump into the water drinking and playing in the pond freely. What makes a flock of sheep behave in this way different from a herd of deer? It is because of Shepherd’s presence. A flock of sheep knows that their shepherd is watching over them and they feel free and safe from all harm.

Jesus is our good shepherd and his flock will be free and safe under his care. Jesus charged Peter to feed his sheep as a shepherd. And here Paul charges the elders of the Ephesian church to be shepherds for God’s church. God’s flock of sheep are precious because they were bought with Jesus’ own blood. There are enemies who try to devour the flock of sheep at all times. Jesus entrusted his flock to his servants to feed and to protect as overseers. Then how can we oversee the flock of sheep? We learn from a shepherd in a pond that we must be near to sheep to see their spiritual whereabouts. A shepherd must be vigilant in prayer and be strong to overpower the enemies of God. As Jesus did for us, a shepherd should be willing to sacrifice for the sheep. Paul was a good example. Look at verse 31. **So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.** Paul kept watch over God’s people in Ephesus night and day for three years and He served God’s flock with tears.

Look at verse 36. “**When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.”** What a beautiful scene, full of love between a shepherd and his flock! Paul's relationship with the elders is a beautiful example of Christian fellowship.He had cared for them and loved them. They responded with love and care for him.

Paul’s farewell message is so graceful. It is because he lived out what he taught throughout his missionary life. But this is not the end of his race. He will continue his race until he reaches Rome, the center of the world. We have the same race that Paul had. Let us be shepherds for God’s flock from today on by closely overseeing our brothers and sisters to know their need and care. Let us share the words of God’s grace one another serving and praying for God’s people with humility and tears.