

## EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #46

Acts 20:13-38

Ministry is a peculiar calling. When a person is in ministry you never really know where you will go or where you will end up. Sometimes you go to a place and nothing seems to work or click. Other times you go to a place and everything seems to work. That is the way it was for Paul. He went to some places and the ministry didn't seem to accomplish much and then he went to other places and big things happened. Paul was always faithful no matter where he was, and he saw God plant churches in many places. But there is no question that one of the places where Paul was used the most was in Ephesus. He stayed there and ministered there and taught there more than anyplace in the world and now that his missionary journeys were ending, he wanted to touch base with the church one more time.

**BEFORE PAUL CONCLUDED HIS FINAL MISSIONARY JOURNEY, HE MADE A POINT OF GATHERING TOGETHER THE ELDERS OF EPHESUS TO REMIND THEM OF HIS MINISTRY AND TO WARN THEM WHAT WOULD HAPPEN WHEN HE WAS GONE.**

The life and ministry of Paul is moving to its conclusion and he is in his final missionary swing to visit people and places and churches God had brought into his life along the way. This will be the last time most of these people ever see Paul until they reunite in heaven, so this information is interesting, important, but most of all it is inspired by God. In this section there are two final travel moves that Paul makes:

**FINAL TRAVEL MOVE #1** – Paul travels from Troas to Miletus. **20:13-16**

**Verse 13** is interesting. Paul's team intended to travel by ship from Troas to Assos. **Apparently Paul decided he wanted his team to collectively travel by ship, but he wanted to privately walk.** The trip from Troas to Assos is about twenty miles by foot and thirty miles by sea. There is a good coastal road that runs from Troas to Assos and if Paul took off walking at 7-8 A.M., he could easily be in Assos by mid-afternoon. Assos was a seaport town in the district of Mysia on the west coast of modern day Turkey. Paul wanted some privacy and solitude away from everyone so he walked. Thomas Walker said every Christian worker needs solitude and quiet at times (*Acts*, p. 472).

I am certain that as Paul walked along, he personally reflected on all God had done with his life on these missionary trips. In fact, this point will become very evident later in this chapter. He did reminisce about all God had done through him. Some great churches had been established and he had met some wonderful people along the way who had helped him, supported him and stood by him. This must have been a very personal, quiet and reflective walk.

**Verse 14** informs us that when Paul got to Assos, he met his team who had traveled by boat and he got on board and took off for the island of Mitylene, which by sea was about thirty miles away. So this entire boat trip covered about sixty miles and was an easy trip to make in one day.

According to **verse 15**, they arrived in Chios on day two, the birthplace of the poet Homer, which is a bow shaped island located seventy-five miles south of Assos. They arrived at Samos on day three, which is another island located forty miles south of Chios and then Miletus on day four, which is about fifty miles southeast of Chios. So four days after leaving Troas, Paul and his team arrived in Miletus. **Miletus was about 28 miles south of Ephesus and well over 200 miles south of Troas.** Miletus was a resort city and was known to be a place that entertained upper class Romans.

Now **verse 16** tells us that Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus because he wanted to get to Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost, a feast which took place fifty days after the Passover. Paul was in a hurry. Now what is interesting is that he could have probably stopped in Ephesus and met with the Elders in less time than it would take to send for them from Miletus and wait for them to get there. But apparently, he was afraid that if he stopped there he would get sidetracked and detained. It was not that he did not love the people, because he had spent several years ministering in Ephesus. The people loved Paul and would want him to teach, so he sailed right by and went on to Miletus.

Also we may observe from **verse 16** that Paul is the one determining when and where they would go. He was the one making the decisions and apparently he was deciding this for the whole ship. So this may have been somewhat of a “chartered boat.” The others were with him, but **Paul is the key apostle and is determining the direction of everything, including where this boat stops.** Why is Luke so intent on such a precise record of their itinerary?

**(Reason #1)** - It proves historical and factual accuracy of the Bible in the Roman world. These were secular, heathen places that were very real when Paul lived and traveled.

**(Reason #2)** - It shows that God was directing, using and providing for Paul who had to live and move in a real world. God did not miraculously transport Paul from point A to point B.

He had to make travel arrangements and travel by normal travel means available to him in the first century.

**(Reason #3)** - God provided enough so that the entire team could travel.

**FINAL TRAVEL MOVE #2** – Paul sends for the elders of Ephesus. **20:17-38**

Paul was on a tight time schedule but he had a pastor’s heart. He felt he needed to meet one more time with those Ephesian elders. Paul wanted to meet with the elders of the church of Ephesus because he had a very important final message to give them. So he sent someone the twenty-eight miles from Miletus to Ephesus to get them.

Now the first thing we want to see is that in a New Testament Pauline church, the spiritual oversight falls to the elders (πρεσβυτερους). Notice the noun “elders” is plural which means there was more than one who functioned in the office of elder. During Paul’s teaching years in Ephesus a true apostolic local church had been formed and its leadership fell to the elders. According to Paul, a true New Testament church is supposed to have two main offices; elders and deacons. Not deacons and trustees. This is the way it is to work.

Now Paul’s final address to the elders is comprised of three main parts:

**PART #1** – Paul reminds the elders of his pastoral ministry to them. **20:17-24**

Paul starts off by reminding them that he was totally committed to them and to the ministry. Wherever he was, he gave it his best.

**(Ministry Fact #1)** - Paul reminds them that he stayed with them and ministered to them with humility and tears even when he was under threat. **20:19**

Paul says that his ministry was characterized by “humility” and “tears” even though he himself faced all kinds of personal hardships and setbacks. Now Paul was no whiner or complainer. He was not what you would call a “weepy person.” In fact, he was very careful to keep his emotions in check (I Cor. 2:3-4). But three times in this text, the subject of tears is mentioned (20:19, 31, 37). There were times Paul cried for the church and the people. If a leader is truly ministering with a heart like Paul, there will be moments when you will shed tears. You will face things that will break you and break your heart.

There are two specific things that we know moved Paul to tears:

- 1) Paul was moved to tears by carnal, fleshly Christians in the church—II Cor. 2:4
- 2) Paul was moved to tears by phony religious leaders who taught works salvation—Phil. 3:3, 18

**(Ministry Fact #2)** - Paul reminds them that he taught them the profitable Word of God privately and publicly. **20:20**

Paul will stress this point again. Paul did not spend his time preaching against poverty or preaching about social reform or individual equality. He preached God’s Word everywhere he went. He taught in synagogues, in the school of Tyrannus and in one house after another.

**(Ministry Fact #3)** - Paul reminds them that true repentance toward God meant faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. **20:21**

The word “repent” (μετανοια) means to change thinking or change your mind (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 287). Paul preached that all people needed to change their thinking and mind about what would make them right with God. What he preached to Jews and Gentiles is that it was faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that would give them a relationship with God.

Paul preached to everybody in the world, both Jew and Gentile. They thought their religious works would make them right with God and Paul preached an entirely different message. The repentance toward God meant one change his thinking about what needed to happen to be right with the Holy God. What needed to happen was one needed to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Lord that is He is God; Jesus is the Savior and Jesus is the Christ that is the Jewish Messiah. What Paul preached is that you need to change your mind about what it is that makes you right with God and rest totally and completely in the finished work of one Person and that one Person is the Lord Jesus Christ.

**(Ministry Fact #4)** - Paul informs them that God's Spirit is leading him to Jerusalem.  
**20:22-23**

He did not know what would happen to him there except the Holy Spirit had revealed that he was going to be arrested and suffer affliction.

**(Ministry Fact #5)** - Paul informs them that his life didn't matter, but God's grace Gospel is what mattered. **20:24**

God's Gospel is a pure grace Gospel and the grace Gospel does not contain any merit or works. In fact, here is what Paul said "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Romans 11:6).

**(Ministry Fact #6)** - Paul informs them that they would not see his face again and reminds them what he taught. **20:25-27**

In **verse 25**, Paul says you will not see his face again, but then he adds I am innocent with you because I went about preaching and teaching things about "the kingdom" (την βασιλειαν). It is obvious that Paul did not leave anything out in the kingdom preaching because he says I declared the whole purpose and counsel of God, and his ministry was about preaching the whole counsel of God. He preached the whole counsel of God concerning God's kingdom and he was innocent of the blood of every man. He taught the truth about the program of God for Israel and the program of God for the Church. He taught that Jesus Christ was the only way into either of those programs.

Paul taught on doctrines of election, predestination and eternal security. He taught the great doctrines of redemption, justification and sanctification and the Holy Spirit's baptism and sealing. He taught positional truth and practical truth. He taught the O.T. and the N.T. He taught the whole counsel of God. Paul was no preacher who tickled people's ears with what they wanted to hear. He taught the truth and that is what led him to say "I am innocent of the blood of all men" (**v. 26**).

This does teach us something significant. If a minister is to be innocent, he must understand and communicate every book of the Bible, including every chapter and every verse. If you jump over things, you cannot say "I declared the whole counsel of God." R. C. Sproul said this is what made him give himself to "expository preaching" (*Acts*, p. 346). He did not want to get before God at his judgment and have God say what teaching did you leave out.

If a medical doctor performed a surgery and missed something he shouldn't have missed, he would be sued for malpractice. It is a shame that ministers cannot be sued for malpractice. There will come a day when we ministers will face a court scene before the Living, Almighty God and we will receive as James said a "stricter judgment" for having been a teacher (James 3:1) It is a minister's job to declare the whole counsel of God and woe to those who do not do that.

**PART #2** – Paul admonishes the elders to their ministry in the church. **20:28-31**

Paul reveals three main admonishments here:

**(Admonishment #1)** - Elders need to be on guard for themselves and for the flock. **20:28**

This is so ironic because Paul did not care about guarding his own physical life (**20:24**), but he did care about guarding his own spiritual life and he wanted these elders to guard theirs also.

**An elder must first and foremost see to it that he is faithful to God and His Word in his own life.** An elder is not a fit elder if he is not working on his own life. If an elder is not guarding his own spiritual life and developing in godliness, he is not fit to be an elder. Before one can govern a flock, he must govern himself. An elder has a responsibility to guard himself and then the flock.

**Reality #1** - Elders have been made overseers by the Holy Spirit. **20:28b**

Behind the election of an elder is the work of the Holy Spirit. So an elder becomes a true elder not by self-election or congregational selection, but by the Holy Spirit. Actually real elders become real elders by divine appointment.

**Reality #2** - Elders need to shepherd the church of God. **20:28c**

Now notice it is God's church, not the elder's church. Now an elder needs to understand that a critical part of his shepherding responsibilities is to see to it that the flock is well fed.

**Reality #3** - Elders need to remember the price of what God paid for His church. **20:28d**

By the way, notice here the blood that purchased the Church is the blood of God and since we know that Jesus Christ shed His blood on the cross, clearly this is one of many proofs that Jesus Christ is God, who purchased the Church with His own blood. It is God's Church; He is the one who bought it and paid for it with His own blood. Elders need to remember this point.

Every elder needs to realize the value of the church; it was purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ. So whatever sacrifice any of us makes for the church will never compare to this sacrifice.

**(Admonishment #2)** - Elders need to know that when a true teacher departs, wolves will come into the church to try to attack the flock. **20:29-30**

When it comes to the church, there are evil "spiritual wolf rustlers" whose goal it is to rob the church of its sheep. These wolves are ferocious and they will arise from without and from within. The way you spot them is by what they say. Their doctrine will not be accurate. They will speak perverse things, contrary to grace and to the whole counsel of God and they will try to draw away their disciples. What makes them so dangerous is that when they first show up they don't look like a wolf.

Do you realize that every theological institution that turned away from the truth such as Harvard, Yale and Princeton did so because some faculty members or President got into the institution and started leading it away from the inspired Scriptures.

**(Admonishment #3)** - Elders need to stay alert and remember the teaching they received for several years. **20:31**

Elders need to be on the lookout for those who propagate faulty doctrines. They need to watch out for the Arminian and Pelagian wolves who try to sneak in and pull God's people away from precious doctrines. They need to be on the look out for the Lordship salvation people who want to add works and commitment to grace. Stay alert because in any true church of God the wolves will show up. For three years Paul taught these men and they needed to remember his teaching and defend it. Paul reminds them there were times he shed tears with them.

**PART #3** – Paul personally commends the elders with his final messages. **20:32-35**

There are three final messages Paul gives.

**(Final Message #1)** - Paul commends them to God. **20:32a**

One commentator said the test of a good doctor is that he can do something for you that makes him no longer needed. Paul says to these elders, I have given you all you need and you no longer need me and so I am commending you and leaving you in the care of God. When you love a church, that is hard to do as a minister, but it is what you must do, when you must move on.

**(Final Message #2)** - Paul commends them to the Word of God's grace. **20:32b**

**The thing that distinguishes biblical Christianity from all religions of the world is grace, which is found in the Word of God. All false systems of religion are based on works and merit.** We may notice here that the grace of God is found in the Word of God and the Word of God is able to do two things: 1) Build you up in the faith; 2) Give those sanctified an inheritance.

**(Final Message #3)** - Paul reminds them that he coveted no man's silver, gold or clothes but at times worked with his own hands. **20:33-35**

Paul never wanted another man's house, money or job. Paul was content with what God had given him. Paul was content with how God provided for him and how God used him.

Paul did take gifts from people and he did say he had a right to be supported, but he never demanded it and there were times in his life and ministry when he worked to help support himself and those with him. We know one such occasion was on his second missionary journey while in Corinth, when he worked with Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2-3). He apparently worked until Silas and Timothy came with some support and then he stopped and ministered full-time.

Here is the thing; Paul was not the kind of minister who would tell you some sob story about his finances so you would give him money. He had more integrity than that. His concept and use of money was beyond reproach. Sometimes he had a lot of money and sometimes he didn't have any money. But he kept ministering God's Word no matter what state he was in and he did give away a lot of money—just as he says “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” This is a wonderful principle to learn and to apply. Giving, not getting is the key to blessing.

**PART #4** – Paul's final moments with the Ephesian elders. **20:36-38**

How do you say goodbye to a man God used so mightily in your life.

**(Final Action #1)** - Paul knelt down and prayed with them all. **20:36**

People who have a Pauline relationship with God will at times get down on their knees and pray. Elders who care about the church will at times get down on their knees and pray for it.

**(Final Action #2)** - They all wept loudly and embraced Paul and repeatedly kissed him. **20:37**

There is nothing perverted here, it is very pure. Just as Jesus was betrayed by the kiss of Judas, Paul was beloved by the kiss of the elders of Ephesus.

**(Final Action #3)** - They grieved and accompanied him to the ship. **20:38**

What was the grace message Paul taught to these Ephesians? It is very simple—“For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourself it is the gift of God not as a result of works that no one should boast.” His message was grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone.