

Matt Henry
Acts 20:17-38
12 May 2019

“Paul Aboard”

God’s grace and peace to you...

How does a nice Mediterranean cruise sound to you? That’s where we’re going today as we look at Acts 20, Paul’s farewell to the elders of Ephesus. It’s a very personal and emotional account. The details in this portion of Paul’s travels give us insight into the kind of person Paul was, how he conducted his ministry, how he shepherded the flock and raised up leaders. There are details here to glean and an itinerary to piece together, and we’ll do that today, but they aren’t details for detail’s sake. They are details for discipleship’s sake. I want you to see how Paul made disciples. Everybody in the church thinks of Paul as an apostle, which he certainly was, but he was also a disciple-maker. Here we are in the 21st century, still carrying out the same mission Christ gave us of making disciples. We also need to live with authenticity and be intentional about helping people grow as they follow Jesus. The dangers are real, the time is short; how will the flock of God do? Paul had to get on board to find out—and so do we. As anyone who’s been on cruise will tell you, don’t miss the boat!

Let’s first look at a map to get our bearing. This is the coast of Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. Paul spent a week in Troas. He pulled an all-nighter there

and preached through the night. This is where Eutychus fell out of the window to his death. Paul revived him—raised him from the dead!--and Paul kept preaching. I love that story. It just goes to show you, you can feign death, and I'll still keep preaching!

Paul goes by land to Assos where Luke and company pick him up again in the boat. They go to Mitylene, Chios, Samos, and then to Miletus. Now the thing I want you to notice is that Paul intentionally avoids the big city of Ephesus all together even though he knows the people there very well. Why? Well, he's in a hurry to get to Jerusalem. He knows that if he sets foot there, it would take too long. It'd be like a woman at Hobby Lobby—some things just can't be rushed.

So we're in Miletus and from there, Paul calls an elder's meeting. The elders from Ephesus come down and meet him there in Miletus. This is happening in the year 58 AD. It's the end of Paul's third missionary journey. Paul is insistent on going to Jerusalem even though everyone is telling him, "Don't do it. It's not safe." And Paul knows they're right. But just as the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, the same Holy Spirit is leading Paul to Jerusalem to be persecuted. It has to be this way and Paul is unwavering. He's in a hurry because he wants to celebrate an important church holiday—Pentecost. Pentecost is not

much on our minds, (it's June 9 this year in case you weren't wondering), but it is on Paul's. So that's the who, when, where.

Let's look at what Paul says to the elders. Verse 18: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time". Why would they know that? Because Paul spent not three weeks, not three months, but three years with them! What kind of relationships does one build in three years? Ask the Twelve Disciples, right? In that timeframe, you can know and be known, you can make mistakes, you can do some good, you can make a major difference in terms of ministry.

May 1 was Call Day at the seminary in St. Louis. I learned at the pastor's conference this week in Pocatello that six churches in the Northwest District had requests for pastors, but we only filled two. It made me think about the whole call process what they tell us about our first call. Even if you don't like your call, don't just get there and leave the place. Stick it out, even if it's hard, because otherwise, the transition is too traumatic for the congregation. For how long? At least three years was the amount of time they tell first year pastors. And then when it came for the second call, there's a trend that it just happens to be closer to the wife's family. So we joke at the seminary that the mother in law corrects what the Holy Spirit got wrong.

I don't think Paul was just sticking it out in Ephesus in these three years. But it's a significant investment of time. It's from Ephesus that Paul writes Galatians (55), 1 Corinthians (56), 1 Timothy (56). And later on, once he's in captivity in Caesarea, Paul will write to the Ephesians, the people he promised in this farewell address that he would never see again. Paul was deeply invested in the lives of the Ephesians. He loved them. They loved him. That's not to say ministry was easy there. In 1 Cor. 15:32, Paul describes at least part of his ministry in Ephesus. He asks, "What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus?"

And sometimes fighting with beasts is an apt description of ministry. Not you guys—I'm talking other people of course...But Paul hung in there. Tears and trials. Three years of pouring into them, of teaching, of serving, of being an example. Three years of ministry. Isn't this important to know—that yes, Paul criss-crossed the Mediterranean. As an apostle, he was all about traveling and proclaiming Jesus as the Christ. But there are times when he did settle down and when he did, we see his pastoral side. It was one thing to care for people and tend the flock when he was present. But now, he has to figure out how to provide spiritual care in his absence. These are comments from the heart of a pastor to his elders. Verse 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.” See the preciousness of God’s people. We are purchased by the blood of Jesus. So Elders need to pay attention. Pay attention to themselves and pay attention to the flock.

But there’s also a warning. There will be trouble. Some of that will come from the outside; some of it will come from the inside. Verse 29, “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.”

Now this, church, should speak to us. Whatever God builds, Satan wants to destroy. We need to know there are external threats to our spiritual well-being. But there are also threats on the inside—and chief among them is false teaching. That’s why it’s so important to not let our guard down. We have to be discerning and measure everything against the Word of God as our standard for faith. We have to make sure the Word of God is regarded as such. We don’t tinker with it, we don’t deviate from it. We must stay faithful to the text by being in the Word. That’s our basis. That’s the move Paul makes too. “And now I commend you to God and to his word of grace which is able to build you up and

to give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (v. 31-32). It’s the word of grace that builds up. It’s the word of grace that describes our inheritance.

A few years ago, my mother in law came into some money and she wanted to take her kids and their families on a European vacation. It’s a rough life I know. What was the catch? She insisted on coming! We were in Cinque Terre on the coast of Italy. And the one thing they told us was “Do not miss the boat.” There were five little neighborhoods like this one. Well, we made it to the last scheduled boat to leave our neighborhood. But Mimi wasn’t there. So we looked back at the docks, no sign of Mimi. The captain started the engine. Then finally we saw Mimi and she saw us. We yelled to her, “Mimi, run!” This was officially a public spectacle now. She started running, but it was no use, she didn’t make it. Mimi was left behind. We were separated. It was kind of traumatic actually. The grandkids were really sad. Until one of the crew told us, who was a little amused at our overreaction, “You know, there’s another boat she can catch.”

I want to encourage you today to get on the boat. Get on board with people. Get on board with discipleship. Will there be another boat? Yes, but why not catch this one? I’d feel better if you were on the boat now. What’s

needed is people who are willing to pour themselves into others as they help people grow as they follow Jesus.

I am calling on the spiritually strong to help others as they impart the word of grace. I am calling on the spiritually weak to put themselves in a position where they can be built up through the word of grace. This takes relationship and time and energy. But it's how the flock is to be tended and protected through relationships—through something like a life group. Did you know I cannot adequately shepherd a group this size? Not even with Elders. It has to be a different configuration where there isn't just structure, but actual relationship. And discipleship is the way to shepherd people. Help them grow. Pour into them. Be poured into. This giving of ourselves is what we were made for. That's where the blessing is. As our Lord Jesus assures us, "It is more blessed to give than receive." When we not only believe that, but live it, then the legacy we leave behind when we depart, won't be one of ourselves, but of Jesus. And that is how it should be.

In Jesus' name, Amen.



Head (What?):

How long did Paul spend in Ephesus?

What trials did Paul experience?

What does Paul know about his upcoming journey to Jerusalem?

What is Paul's warning to the elders? Still applicable today?

Heart (So what?):

When have you shrunk in sharing what you believe?

While in the midst of trials, how do you serve the Lord with **all** humility?

If asked, what would those around you say is your aim in life (eg parents, siblings, spouse, children, co-workers, etc)?

Share a time (not a death situation) when you had to say goodbye to someone you loved for a greater purpose.

Hands (Now what?):

How can you demonstrate daily obedience to live for God no matter the cost?

What steps can you take to align your aim with Paul's?

What can you do for the flock as part of the flock?

Who needs your attention and even protection?