

## Introduction

I spent a number of years in the mortgage business helping folk buy homes and refinance their homes. There is a pile of documents a person must sign when getting a home loan and if you're not familiar with them, they can be quite confusing. There were two documents, however, that were supposed to make things simple: the so-called "Good Faith Estimate" and the "Truth-in-Lending" disclosure. The Good Faith Estimate was a standard form used by everyone that was so very helpful it had to be replaced in 2015 with a simpler form, the "Loan Estimate".

The Truth-in-Lending disclosure *helpfully* clarifies the cost of borrowing by calculating an "Annual Percentage Rate" that is based on the quoted interest rate and certain closing costs. As *everyone* knows, your payment isn't based on the Annual Percentage Rate, but on the interest rate but if you were to add in those closing costs to your payment every year and then reverse-calculate the interest rate based on this higher-than-actual payment, your interest rate *would be* the Annual Percentage Rate but since those particular closing costs are one-time only, the interest rate is the interest rate, and not the Annual Percentage Rate. See? *Helpful*.

Fortunately the Lord and his apostles did not need various written disclosures designed to simplify their message. There are no "hidden fees" in following Jesus. There is no need for a special document that clarifies the arcane technicalities that only a few can truly comprehend. The truth is the apostles themselves were the disclosures. They were the real-life demonstrations of their message. The apostles could say, "Look at me" when instructing believers how to live. Yes, they produced holy Scripture, but their lives were the real-life illustration of their message. We see this in our text this morning.

Acts 20:17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. <sup>18</sup> 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, <sup>19</sup> serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; <sup>20</sup> how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, <sup>21</sup> testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I testify to

you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, <sup>27</sup> for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. <sup>32</sup> 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.

Acts 20:17–32

## Paul's Ministry

Several months have passed since Paul left Ephesus. We saw in chapter 19 the Spirit of God was leading him to go to Macedonia and Achaia and then to Jerusalem. His goal was to get to Rome and then on to Spain—"the end of the world". After being in Ephesus for two years Luke says he stayed a while longer. Turns out this means about a year longer.

Last week we saw the near-riot with Demetrius that was skillfully defused by the town clerk. Then Paul left for Macedonia and Achaia. He discovered a plot against him when he was headed toward Syria so his travel plans were changed and he went back through Macedonia. After a number of other stops Paul and his team ended up in Miletus—about 30 miles from Ephesus.

From there Paul called for the elders of the church. Notice there are multiple elders in the church in Ephesus. This council of elders leads the church and serves the church together in this role. Paul wants to meet with them before he moves on to Jerusalem because he does not know what his future holds.

He tells them in verse 18 they know how he lived among them from the time he arrived in Asia. They were able to see his life. It wasn't hidden from them. He lived and worked among them. He endured suffering among them. In verse 19 he mentions the tears and the trials he endured. Luke doesn't record these particular trials but we have an idea what he means. We saw last week that during the near-riot the Jews put forward a man named Alexander. They wanted him to address the crowd in order to draw a distinction between Jews and Christians. In Paul's letter to Timothy he warned Timothy,

<sup>2</sup> Tim 4:14 Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. <sup>15</sup> Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.

2 Timothy 4:14–15

It's possible this is a different Alexander as it was a popular name. Given the details in Acts 19 it's reasonable to think this is the same Alexander. Whether he's a different Alexander or not, here we see some of Paul's tears and trials he endured. This would have consisted of verbal abuse and perhaps even physical abuse. We know he was whipped on five occasions in the synagogue. We know he could have simply avoided this by resigning his

membership in the synagogue. We also know had he done so, he would have lost access to *all* synagogues so rather than lose the opportunity to preach Christ, he endured this suffering. As he told Timothy, he endures “everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:10).

Paul tells the elders from the church in Ephesus *they know this*. They saw his life up close. They witnessed first-hand how he responded to trouble and to pressure and to suffering. They know, he says, how he continued serving the Lord in humility—he, one of the holy apostles! Despite the suffering and the tears, Paul reminds them they know he did not shrink from declaring anything profitable. He did not shrink from teaching them publicly and from house to house.

What, exactly, was profitable? He was teaching them holy Scripture! Scripture is *profitable*. It confers a benefit. It is useful. There is great value in teaching Scripture. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake, however, isn’t Paul’s point. What is the primary subject of Scripture? What does he say? He didn’t shrink back from declaring to them anything that was profitable or from teaching them both publicly and privately—verse 21—“testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ”.

Jesus himself said the entirety of the Law and the Prophets and the Writings, which we call “the Old Testament”, were about him. They pointed God’s people to Jesus. Paul says that the sufferings he endured did not cause him to shrink or to draw back from teaching them the Scriptures, which is to say, he was not timid when it came to proclaiming Christ.

The subject of Paul’s preaching was Christ. The subject of Paul’s teaching was Christ. The center of Paul’s ministry was Christ. He wasn’t in Ephesus telling them how to have a happy marriage or how to be a good employee or good citizen or good neighbor. He wasn’t there telling them about to spice up their sex life. He wasn’t there telling them how to live abundantly or in prosperity or how to have a fulfilling *anything*. He told them about the Lord Jesus and his righteousness is their righteousness through faith, how he sent his Spirit to dwell among them to cause them to become more like Jesus. This was Paul’s ministry in Asia and everywhere else he went.

## Paul’s Life

In verse 22 he tells the council of elders from Ephesus he is going to Jerusalem and he does so “constrained by the Spirit”. He was bound by the Spirit. He was in chains by the Spirit. He would, soon, be literally bound in chains, but the chains of the Spirit are far stronger than any earthly chains. Paul understood his life existed for the glory of God in Christ and if the Spirit of God is sending him to Jerusalem, then he has no choice but to go to Jerusalem. Physical chains wouldn’t make him any more likely to get there than the Spirit’s constraint.

I find this strangely comforting. Surely there were times Paul was tempted to quit. Surely there were times Paul felt overwhelmed and exasperated and frustrated and defeated. Surely there were times Paul was keenly aware of his own shortcomings—shortcomings that threatened to undo all his work thus far. In those moments, no doubt, Paul’s team reminded him he was the *Lord’s* servant. Even when he was in literal chains in a literal prison, he was constrained by the Spirit. This means the Spirit would be his strength when he had no strength, for the Spirit sustains our faith.

Paul says he doesn't know what will happen to him in Jerusalem. He doesn't know if he will be arrested, stoned, whipped, crucified, mocked and scorned. This is what living by faith means. It doesn't mean a life of wishful thinking, for that is not what faith means. Faith means going where the Lord sends you even if you don't know the immediate outcome, which is only possible because you know the *ultimate* outcome. Paul knows he belongs to the Lord and if the Lord is sending him to Jerusalem to *suffer*, Paul will follow the Lord. He knows who holds his future and he submits himself to him.

He has an idea, though. The Spirit has revealed to him that "imprisonment and afflictions" await him in every city. He doesn't know the degree to which he will suffer, but he knows he will suffer for Jesus. He can willingly and boldly go to Jerusalem because he doesn't consider his life to be particularly precious to himself. This isn't self-hate, mind you. Jesus said we must take up our crosses in order to follow him. Paul's cross, while not a literal cross, was a cross that would finally result in his death, though as a Roman citizen he could not be crucified. His cross was suffering and difficulty. His cross was public shame and opposition. His cross was a life of hardship as he traveled about, preaching Christ and planting churches.

What Paul valued more than his own life was faithfulness to Jesus. The Lord had given everything for Paul; the good and right response to this was to lay down his life for the Lord. His life had no particular value apart from that given it by the Lord Jesus so his aim was to finish the work he had been given to do. That work included suffering, so Paul embraced the suffering, that he might "testify to the gospel of the grace of God".

The word "gospel" means good news; it is the proclamation of victory. The grace of God was victorious, for it accomplished exactly what God intended to accomplish. As Paul told Timothy, Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners. This is exactly what his death and resurrection accomplished. He did not merely make salvation possible: he secured the salvation of his people.

When Paul testifies to the gospel of the grace of God, he's proclaiming the victory of Christ. Jesus has defeated sin. He has defeated death. As we'll see in the letter to the Ephesians, he has defeated the spiritual forces of evil that seek to steal, kill, and destroy. To a culture dominated by the belief in magic and filled with desperate attempts to control fate, Paul proclaimed the victory of the Lord Jesus. He and he alone is sovereign. He does not need permission to act. He acts on his own accord and no one can stop him, including spiritual forces we cannot see.

What Paul desires more than anything else, including more than the preservation of his own life, is to remain faithful to his calling, which is to proclaim this victory of God in Christ. He tells these elders they will never see his face again. He knows this much. He will not be able to return to Asia. He then expresses his certainty that he is "innocent of the blood of all", for he did not shrink or hesitate to proclaim "the whole counsel of God".

Keep in mind he's speaking to the council of elders, not the church. The church in Ephesus was already too large for Paul to teach individually. He certainly proclaimed the gospel faithfully in their gathered assembly, but there is no way Paul could have taught them all from house to house. Paul focused his efforts on training and preparing the council of elders. They, the shepherds of the church, *could* teach from house to house—not individually, but as a council of equals.

He means he has taught them God's plan for the world, his decree, his purpose for the

world. God in Christ through his Spirit is making all things new, and this work begins with his people. We can long for the restoration of all things, for disease and systems of evil and oppression to end, but why should these things end when we ourselves are not yet whole? His work *begins* with us, but it will not *end* with us. It will extend throughout the entire universe, for when the Lord Jesus returns, he will recreate the heavens and the earth.

While Paul will not return to Ephesus, he knows he has prepared these men to carry on the task first given him, and then to the elders of the church, and that task centers on God's plan for the world. As Paul put it in Ephesians 3, he has taught them God's "eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord". With this understanding of God and of Scripture, the elders from Ephesus are able to fulfill their responsibilities in the church though they will never again see the apostle.

### Paul's Warning

In verse 28 he urges them to pay careful attention to themselves and to all the flock. The word translated "care" here means to shepherd or to pastor. Once again the elders are commanded *to pastor* but as we'll see in Ephesians 4, elders are never *called* "pastors". Shepherding is a function of the office of elder and it is a spiritual gift but the spiritual gift is not the office.

They must, he says, *shepherd* themselves. They must care for one another. The idea that a lone shepherd would lead and serve a church is simply foreign to Paul's understanding of the church. There's lot of talk about self-care today, but there's no such thing as spiritual self-care. God works in his church *in community*. It's never just "you and Jesus", but "*y'all* and Jesus".

Not only must they care for one another, they must "pay careful attention" to the flock. Here he uses that shepherding metaphor. The church in Ephesus is God's flock. He then says the Holy Spirit has made them—the elders—*overseers* of the church. Historically these words have been translated as "priest" and "bishop". Notice they refer to the same group. He calls the elders—the "priests"—and tells them God has made them overseers—"bishops". Thus priests and bishops are the same. Or elders and overseers are the same. These are two words for the same office that have slightly different emphases yet refer to the same office.

As we've seen, some elders are set apart vocationally. They are ordained to vocational ministry wherein they are set apart to do the work of an overseer full time. They are still elders like the other elders.

These elder or overseers have been put in this role by the Holy Spirit for a specific purpose. He says in verse 28 this purpose is *to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood*. Here Paul demonstrates his Trinitarian thinking, for he speaks of God and of the Spirit and of God's blood, which as we know means the blood of Jesus. That he says God did this with *God's* blood illustrates he understands Jesus is God.

Being God, he paid a price for his church and that price was his life. This is the very reason he became one of us, that he might live and die and rise again. As Gregory of Nazianzus put it,

For that which he has not assumed he has not healed. But that which is united to God will be saved.

Gregory of Nazianzus, Letter to Cledonius

God's eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ is that the Son of God would become everything we are, that we might become what he is. We don't become God but we become like him. God's Son became human and by being sinless became what it means to be *truly human*. The result or purpose of this is that we might also become truly human by accurately reflecting the image of God in Christ.

Paul's concern is for the elders of Ephesus to care for one another and to care for Christ's church because a danger exists. A danger that seeks to interrupt the process of becoming more like Jesus exists within the church. After he leaves "fierce wolves" will come into the church. He sticks with his metaphor here. A great danger to sheep—God's flock—is the wolf. Wolves will seek to enter the church and destroy sheep. They won't just come from the outside, however. He says in verse 30 that the danger exists inside as well: "from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things".

Here we see a primary purpose of the elders is to guard the truth of God. The danger lies in moving away from the truth and as we saw earlier in this text, the truth Paul means is the truth of God *in Christ*. This is one reason we will not allow politics to divide us here in the church. You can vote your conscience here at New City because we believe the unity Christ creates in his church cannot be broken by a ballot.

Whenever false teaching arises, it is always drawing people away from Christ, even if the words are not words that make this claim. A church that exists, for example, for engaging in social good may never say Christ is irrelevant, but if they never preach Christ and if they do not preach Christ alone, they are drawing men and women away from Christ.

Should we engage in social good? Absolutely! Join us a week from Wednesday for "Lights on Creston"! We're opening up our Community Room to serve our neighbors during this community event. We're handing out cookies and coffee and cocoa because we love our neighbors and we want them to enjoy their evening in our neighborhood. If engaging in this sort of behavior becomes the thing we're about rather than the thing we do a result of being about Jesus, we're being drawn away from Jesus.

Paul warns this council of elders that the danger they face is one of their people being drawn away from Christ and toward literally anything else. The church will either preach Christ and Christ alone or it will preach anything else, for one cannot preach Christ and Christ alone *along with anything else* for as soon as you add to Christ, you actually subtract from him.

Believing the gospel will result in seeking to obey the Lord's command to love our neighbors as ourselves but if loving our neighbors as ourselves becomes our goal, we are necessarily moving beyond the gospel. Loving the community and doing good to others must be a response to the gospel or it will become a replacement for the gospel.

For this reason the elders must be alert, just as Paul for three years urged them to faithfulness. They cannot give up, and Paul gives the reason he is confident they will not: he commends them or he *entrusts* them to God and to the word of his grace, for God and God alone is able to build up his church and enable his church to remain faithful.

## Application

This conversation between the apostle Paul and the council of elders from Ephesus is the only time Luke records Paul addressing believers. Every other time Paul speaks in the book of Acts, he's speaking to unbelievers. These interactions with unbelievers are extremely helpful as they demonstrate how to proclaim the gospel. This interaction with the elders from Ephesus also demonstrates how to proclaim the gospel.

The gospel is for Christians, too. It is not merely an explanation of how one becomes a believer. Rather, it is the proclamation of the victory of Christ for his people and is how you and I are supposed to live. Seeing what Paul says to the elders shows us how we are supposed to live.

That great New Testament scholar Eckhard Schnabel helpfully summarizes Paul's instructions to the elders.

These elders/overseers have two tasks. They must keep watch over themselves, taking care of their own theological, spiritual, and ethical integrity. If they do not nurture themselves, they cannot take care of others. They must also keep watch over “the whole flock” (παντι τῷ ποιμνίῳ), caring for all members of the church—Jewish and Gentile believers, slaves and freeborn, rich and poor, men and women, and old and young.

While the overseers lead the flock, they are at the same time part of the flock. They are not set over against the church but are an integral part of it. The care for the church is a task to which the Holy Spirit has “appointed” (ἔθετο) them. When Paul and his coworkers appointed elders (14:23, with the verb χειροτονέω, “appoint, install”), they acted with the authority of the Holy Spirit. The leaders of the church are neither chosen “from below” in a “democratic” election, nor imposed “from above” by a decision of apostles, but “from within” as the Holy Spirit is present and active in the church as God's holy temple, “choosing and preparing by his gifts those who are to be ministers.”

Eckhard J. Schnabel, ZECNT, p. 845

Our practice at New City is to look for those God is raising up to serve as elders. We look for men who are actively shepherding others, who have the spiritual maturity necessary for the role, who demonstrate faithfulness in every area of their lives. Then, when the Lord urges us to move forward, we present such a man to the church as a candidate for the office of overseer. There is not a popular vote. We would never present two candidates, for example, with the church choosing *between* them. Further, our elders do not serve terms. If God raises up a man to shepherd the church, who are we to limit how long he can shepherd?

When we look at Paul's instructions to the elders from Ephesus, his emphasis on their ministry must be our emphasis for living. Paul himself was the clarifying document for what faithful living would look like. He himself showed them how he lived among them, how he endured suffering, how he faithfully followed the Lord's leading even when it resulted in suffering.

Through it all Paul remained committed to the center of his preaching and teaching, the center of his apostolic ministry: the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul understood the

work he was given to do and he would do that work even if it cost him his life. That work was always and ever the proclamation of the victory of Christ.

Paul could do this because he understood *the whole counsel of God*. That is, he understood what God in Christ through his Spirit is doing in the world and he understood where it was all heading. It begins with the victory of Christ. As we will see more clearly in his letter to the Ephesians, this victory was over spiritual forces of evil, of all that stands opposed to God.

The god of this world, the prince of the power of the air, that great enemy of God once had us trapped in sin and shame. Then the one true God made us alive together with Christ. He sealed us with his Spirit, which marks us as his own. He claims us as his people and has adopted us as his children. This was his eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus. Through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus defeated these spiritual forces of evil.

Because of his victory, you and I can walk faithfully with the Lord. The very thing that stands opposed to us—sin—*has been defeated*. It hangs around, fighting desperately, but sin and death are both defeated. With the same power and authority that once declared, “Let there be light”—and there was light—declared on the cross, “It is finished”. *And it was finished*.

We’ve taken our series title from the great Chinese evangelist and church planter—an apostle, really—Watchman Nee. He wrote a brief study of the letter to the Ephesians and noted the very basic outline of it. Paul instructs the church in Ephesus to first sit. They must rest in the truth of the gospel. They must sit and enjoy the truth of God in Christ through his Spirit. Only then can hope to walk faithfully. It is only by first sitting in the truth of the gospel that you and I will be able to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. And it is only by walking faithfully can we hope to stand against the defeated spiritual forces of evil that nevertheless still rail against us.

Church, we must sit, walk, and stand. We must sit or rest in the gospel. Christ has done it. He has accomplished everything necessary for our life and salvation. Because this is true we must walk in a manner that reflects this great reality. We must live out our faith for the Spirit is present and active in our lives to make us more like Jesus. Then and only then can we hope to stand firm in the gospel, unmoved and unswayed by whatever storms this life brings.