

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Paul's Farewell Address in Miletus (Part 1)

Acts 20:17–24

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to Acts 20. Our passage for today and for next Sunday is Acts 20:17–38, Paul's "Farewell Address in Miletus" to the Ephesian elders. Today, we will study the first part of that in Acts 20:17–24. Next week we will look at Acts 20:25–38.¹

And let me start this message today by asking you the following morbid question. What do you want said about you at your funeral? How do you want people to remember you? Now I've asked you those questions before. I've said in the past please don't make me lie at your funeral. Live your life in such a way that the pastor will have plenty of material to work with when he eulogizes you.

But today, as we look at the Apostle Paul in Acts 20, I want to take another run at those questions. But I want to ask them a little differently. Here's what I want to ask: What do you want to be able to say about yourself at the end of your life? If you were doing a performance review on yourself at the end of your life, what would you want to be able to say?

Amazingly we have all this content on the Apostle Paul at the end of his life... not just here but also in 1 and 2 Timothy. And Paul started thinking about the end of his life many years before he died. In Acts 20, he meets with a group of Ephesian elders and gives some important statements of self-reflection. And, as I understand it, historically, Paul met with those Ephesian elders in approximately AD 57. Paul's going to live at least five more years. I actually think he lives about ten more years, dying in AD 67 at the hands of Emperor Nero. He's going to be imprisoned several more times in the book of Acts. And he's going to be imprisoned a final time even after the book of Acts ends.

But even ten years before his death, Paul was thinking about how to finish life well. And he met with these elders for the last time in Acts 20 to give them his swan song.² And Paul gives us three things that he was able to say to the Ephesians.³ And these are things that I want to be able to say at the end of my life. These are things that we should all aspire to say at the end of our lives.

Three things. Here's the first. At the end of your life, you want to be able to say this:

¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 623: "This scene records Paul's only speech made exclusively to Christians and his third major public speech (Antioch: 13:16–41 [to Jews]; Athens: 17:22–31 [to Gentiles]). It also is the speech that is most conceptually similar to his letters, which is not surprising, since this audience is most like the audience for his letters."

² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 843: "It appears that Paul was released after two years of imprisonment in Rome, engaged in missionary work in Spain, and returned to the east, spending time on Crete (Titus 1:5), in Nicopolis in the province of Epirus (Titus 3:12), in Macedonia (1 Tim 1:3), and in Troas in the province of Asia (2 Tim 4:13). If he did not return to Ephesus during his last journeys in the Aegean regions, his premonition in v. 25 proved to be correct; if he did visit Ephesus, his premonition would have been premature." Some scholars think Paul was mistaken and did visit Ephesus later in life (after the events of Acts 28). For example, Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 426–7: "This was Paul's conviction at this time, based upon the minimal knowledge he had about what was to happen to him in Jerusalem. Later, Paul wrote twice from Rome about his plans of coming east again (Phil. 2:24; Philem. 22). The Pastoral Epistles show that Paul did return to Ephesus after all (1 Tim. 1:3; 3:14; 4:13). He also returned to two nearby places: Troas (2 Tim. 4:13) and Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20). So, he did see the elders again, although he did not realize it when he said goodbye." This doesn't necessarily have to be the case. Paul could have met with Timothy outside of Ephesus, and I would argue that this was Paul's way because he wanted the elders of the church (including Timothy) to lead without his direct interference in the city. This was modeled in Acts 20.

³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 623: "What he says to the community of Ephesus could be said to any of the communities to which he has a ministry. Indeed, this is how the passage functions in Acts. It tells churches how to carry on now that they will minister without figures such as Paul present."

1) "I have served the Lord with **humility** and **determination**" (Acts 20:17-19)

Now here's the context of Paul's statement. If you remember from our previous study in **Acts**, Paul has been travelling around the Roman Empire preaching the gospel, planting churches, and training up leaders. When we last saw Paul, he was travelling from Corinth to Jerusalem and he stopped in Troas where he spent the whole day and all night teaching the church from the Scriptures (see map).



Paul in Miletus before Traveling to Jerusalem⁴

Remember that's where Eutychus was overcome by sleep, and fell out of a third story window. Paul, raised him from the dead, and then they all went back to the upper room for some more teaching.

The reason Paul did that is because this was his last chance to teach that church in Troas. He knew that life was about to change forever. So he made the most of his last opportunity with them.

And after he was done there in Troas, Paul boarded a ship and set sail for Jerusalem.⁵ But before he gets to Jerusalem in **Acts 21**, Paul has one more stop that he needs to make. He decides that he wants to impart one final goodbye message to the leaders of the church in Ephesus.

Look with me at **Acts 20:16**.

¹⁶ For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.

Paul's in a hurry to get to Jerusalem. And he doesn't want to go into the city of Ephesus. Probably because he doesn't want to start another riot in Ephesus! And also because he doesn't have time to meet and greet with everyone in the Ephesian church. **You know how it is. You go to the city and you've got to go say "hi" to so-and-so. You've got to go have coffee with that guy who got saved while he was in Ephesus. You've got to go have dinner with Mr. and Mrs. so-and-so whom you baptized.** Paul couldn't do it. He didn't have time for that.

Plus, he's got money that he's collected from all these churches for the church in Jerusalem. It's just not a good idea to go back to Ephesus and spend time there. But he does have a final word for the leaders of Ephesus. And this is strategic because the Apostle Paul can't keep leading the church in Ephesus. He's passing the torch on to the elders in Ephesus.⁶

So here's what he does. Look at **verse 17**.

⁴ Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), December 19, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

⁵ Mohler, *Acts 13-28 for You*, 114-5: "Jerusalem is central for Paul because of its significance in the life of the early church. While Jerusalem was the birthplace of the church, persecution and the execution of the apostle James meant that the locus of church leadership and population quickly shifted to Antioch. Jerusalem quickly became home to the rejection of the gospel and a danger to the Christian movement. To proclaim the name of Christ in Jerusalem was tantamount to signing your own death sentence. Paul, however, does not press toward Jerusalem in order to self-destruct. He feels bound by the Spirit. There's also a missiological purpose to his travel. In terms of his ministry, the preaching of the gospel to the glory of God is everything to Paul. He measures the worth of his life by whatever purpose God will use it for."

⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 626: "The presence of elders in Ephesus shows that Paul structured the church and its leadership before departing (see Acts 11:30; 14:23). These elders would be responsible for shepherding the church and guiding it, as Paul's speech itself indicates."

¹⁷ Now from Miletus [this is a port city about 30 miles south of Ephesus]⁷ he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.⁸ ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them:

By the way, **Acts 20** is about 25 years after the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost. So the church has exploded onto the world in the last 25 years. And Paul's been a big part of that.

And by **Acts 20**, Paul's life is starting to wind down. He's planted most of the churches that he's going to plant. He's written about half of his thirteen epistles: **Galatians; Romans; 1 and 2 Corinthians; and 1 and 2 Thessalonians**. Most of the rest of his life will be spent in prison.

And knowing that his ministry is winding down and knowing that this will be the last opportunity to minister to the church in Ephesus, a place where he's spent three years of his life, he calls the elders down to Miletus and he gives them one final charge. And Ephesus is a strategic city too. It'll be the hub of much of the Christian activity in the years ahead.

Now let's think about this one wrinkle in **verse 17**. Paul doesn't go to the whole church in Ephesus—he doesn't have time. And he doesn't call the whole church down to Miletus—that's too many people. He calls the elders.⁹ Why? He doesn't call the deacons. He doesn't call the new converts that he's led to Christ and baptized. He calls the elders. Why?

Well, the elders *lead* the church. The elders (πρεσβύτερος [*presbyteros*]) are the shepherds and the overseers of the church.¹⁰ They are responsible to God for keeping watch over souls in the church.¹¹ **If Paul was passing through Texas and he didn't have time to stop by Messiah Bible Church and meet with all of us, but he still wanted to instruct us, he would call the elders of Messiah to him and give us a charge.**

Alistair Begg tells the story about a study that was conducted by the Church of England about 150 years ago.¹² And the study was designed to find out what makes a parish (or an Anglican church community) healthy and what makes them unhealthy. And in the report for that study they got to one issue very, very quickly. Do you know what that issue was? Leadership.

Here's what the report says, "Conditions vary from parish to parish. The determining factor being the personality of the incumbent [pastor]. More particularly is this the case in villages, where a spiritual leader can make an astonishing difference [in the health of the church]."¹³ Let me put that in other words for you. According to that report, church health is largely determined by the health and spiritual vitality of its leaders.

⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 838n1760: "Bock, *Acts*, 621, posits 30 miles between Ephesus and Miletus, which is correct for a crow that can fly (recognized by Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 676, who nevertheless uses the same figure [of 50 kilometers], without consulting a map). However, actual travelers on foot had to cross over the spur between the Thorax Mountains and the Mycale Mountains, travel southwest upon reaching Magnesia on the Maeander River, reaching the coast via Priene, then turn east along the northern shore of the Gulf of Latmos (which was silted up by late antiquity; for the shoreline in Roman times; cf. Richard J. A. Talbert, *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, Map 61 inset]; see *Map-by-Map Directory* 2:937), turning west at Heracleia, continuing along the southern shore of the Gulf of Latmos, reaching Miletus after about 100 kilometers (62 miles). Travelers on foot walked 15 Roman miles on average per day, i.e., 25 kilometers (15 miles)."

⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 838: "The journey of Paul's emissary—one of his associates who conveyed Paul's message (πέμψας) to Ephesus—and the return journey of the elders would have taken four days each."

⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 424: "Of the various discourses by Paul recorded in *Acts*, this is the only one where the apostle was speaking to believers; all the others, both before and after this message, were to unbelievers."

¹⁰ For more on elder leadership in the church, see the following:

- 1) Tony Caffey, "1 Peter 5:1–5: An Encouragement to Elders and Deacons," 11-02-22: <https://www.messiahbible.org/1-peter-5-1-5-an-encouragement-to-elders-and-deacons>
- 2) Tony Caffey, "Hebrews 13:17–25, "A Set of Final Expectations," 07-16-23: <https://www.messiahbible.org/hebrews-13-17-25-a-set-of-final-expectations>

¹¹ HEINRICH BULLINGER: "In his whole speech, Paul teaches nothing other than what sort of people should be bishops, that is, ministers of the gospel, to whom the salvation of souls is entrusted. From this they have an example set before them to imitate." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 281.

¹² See Begg's sermon "Transparency, Integrity, Urgency," 06-19-05: <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/transparency-integrity-urgency/>

¹³ Quoted from *Ibid*.

And you might say to that, “Thank you Pastor Tony for that blinding flash of the obvious.” Well stay with me, here. Let me ask you a question—How many people do you know who choose a church because of its facilities or programs instead of leadership? How many people do you know who choose churches because of the musical style? How many people do you know who choose churches because of the prominence or the visibility of people that attend those churches? Yet studies have shown 150 years ago, and also today, that leadership and the spiritual health of those leaders is the most important determining factor for the spiritual health of the church. Paul gets that. Paul understands that. And so he takes advantage of this opportunity to make one final deposit with the Ephesian elders. Because he knows that the health of that church moving forward can’t depend upon him... and these elders are going to have to step up and get the job done when he’s gone.

Now before Paul gets into what the leaders need to do... it’s interesting to me how his instruction to them is primarily about getting rid of wolves in the church. That’s fascinating to me. We’ll talk more about that next time.

But before he gives them instructions, he gives them his testimony. And it’s not a testimony about how he got saved. Paul’s going to talk about that again and again while he’s in prison speaking to unbelievers. Paul’s testimony here with them is more about how he has faithfully ministered in the church. This is his testimony about how he has, “post-conversion,” offered up his body as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God (**Rom 12:1–2**).

And I don’t think Paul is saying this just to toot his own horn. He’s not telling the Ephesian elders what he’s done so that they can pass on to everyone else how awesome Paul is. **“O that Paul, he’s so awesome. I could never be like him.”** No Paul is saying these things so that others would imitate him.¹⁴ He’s saying this because he views a life of service and self-sacrifice and humble determination for the Lord as normative for the Christian life.¹⁵

And Paul wants the Ephesian elders, and the Holy Spirit wants us, two-thousand years later, to be able to say these same types of things at the end of our lives. “What kind of things, Tony?” “I served the Lord with humility and determination.”

Look at verse 18.

¹⁸ ... “You yourselves know¹⁶ how I lived among you¹⁷ the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord [the Greek here could be translated “serving as a slave for the Lord.” The Greek word is δουλεύω (*douleuō*), and it’s stronger than just “serving.” Paul is commenting here on how he was bought and owned by the Lord... he was a slave of righteousness for him]¹⁸ with all humility¹⁹ and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews;²⁰

¹⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 425: “Paul was not defending his ministry. He was presenting it as an example for the Ephesian leaders to emulate. It is a worthy example for every servant of the Lord: a ministry marked by humility, openness, and inclusiveness and rooted in the gospel.”

¹⁵ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 208: “The New Testament teaches that the heart of leadership is example.”

¹⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 424: “He began by reminding them of his arrival. He used personal pronouns in an emphatic way: ‘You yourselves know that what I am about to tell you is true.’ They all knew quite well how he lived among them from the first day he set foot in Asia, which would have been about four years earlier.”

¹⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 839: “They understand that he lived with them (μεθ’ ὑμῶν), not in the splendid isolation of some missionary headquarters but in the same environment in which they lived.”

¹⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 839: “Paul’s ministry was subservient ministry. He ‘served the Lord as his slave’ (δουλεύων τῷ κυρίῳ); i.e., he consented to and carried out the will of Jesus, Israel’s crucified and risen Messiah and Lord. 1766 Most English translations downplay the significance of the strong term δουλεύω, which does not simply mean “serve” but ‘to be owned by another, be a slave’ and ‘to act or conduct oneself as one in total service to another, perform the duties of a slave.’ Paul repeatedly and prominently describes himself as a (lit.) “slave of Jesus the Messiah” (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 7:22; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1).”

¹⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 839: “Humility (or ‘modesty’) means, negatively, the renunciation of any will to rule, and, positively, serving with goodness and understanding.”

²⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 424: “It is striking that Paul reminded the Ephesian elders of his trials through the plots of the Jews. The narrative of his Ephesian ministry in Acts does not relate any specific Jewish plot against him, although such plots occur frequently in the overall story of Paul’s mission—at Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth. The most recent plot was ultimately responsible for his presence at Miletus at this time, causing him to change his original plan to sail directly to Syria from Corinth (20:3).”

I heard a story once about Ruth Graham, the famous wife of Billy Graham, a well-known author in her own right. One time a well-known evangelist went over to the Graham house as she served lunch. And then afterwards she collected all the plates and took them to the sink and started to wash the dishes. And over her sink in her home was a plaque that read, “Divine Service, Done Here, Daily.” That’s a great picture of humility. No false pretense. No pomp and circumstance... just a faithful servant of God who did her part to serve and build the kingdom of God.

Similarly Paul says here, **“I lived among you as one of you... I didn’t live among you like a King among his subjects. I didn’t lord my authority over you. I didn’t use my great intellect or my extensive learning to browbeat you into submission. I didn’t tell you to do something that I wasn’t willing to do myself. Instead I loved you. I lived among you. I ate with you. I drank with you. I came to your homes. I baptized you and your family. I taught you the Scriptures. I risked my life to minister to you.” “I served the Lord among you with humility.”**

And there were tears! **“Why were there tears, Paul? What were you crying about?”** Only a person who doesn’t know the heartbreak of ministry would ask a question like that. The truth is that if you choose to humbly, faithfully, serve the Lord in the context of the church, there will be tears.²¹

Why? Why is that the case? Well, let me direct you to my favorite Bible verse: **John 11:35**, “Jesus wept.” And Paul wept too.

Why would Paul be accustomed to shedding tears? **Well, if you’ve ever watched helplessly as a person whom you love walks away from their faith, you know how to shed tears. If you’ve ever counseled someone who stuck in a dysfunctional marriage and couldn’t turn it around, you know how to shed tears. If you’ve ever pleaded with the Lord to grab the hearts of your children so that they would submit their lives to Christ... If you’ve ever watched a person die and did their funeral... If you’ve ever been brokenhearted over disunity within the body of Christ and felt utterly helpless before God... then you know what it means to serve the Lord with humility and with tears.**

Some of this has to do simply with personal investment in people’s lives. If you’re going to invest in people, you’re going to get hurt. And if you’re going to serve the Lord with humility and determination, you’re going to suffer and weep.

R Kent Hughes once wrote that if **“enlarge your heart”** and **“discipline yourself for ministry,”** then **“you will enlarge your experience of pain.”**²² He continues: **“No one has ever cultivated a ministering heart and lived to tell of a life of ease.”**²³

Additionally he writes, **“If our ambition is to dodge the troubles of human existence, the formula is simple: avoid entangling relationships, do not give yourself to others, and be sure not to seriously embrace elevated and noble ideals.”**²⁴ **“That sounds great. Sign me up for that!”** **The problem with that is that you will never know the joy of serving Christ. You will never know the deep satisfaction that comes with being a spiritual leader and a discipler. And if you cocoon yourself off from people, you will live a safe, shallow, and selfish life, and die an unmourned death.**

And let me say this too. I mentioned the importance of both humility and determination. These are things that Paul exemplified, and they are not mutually exclusive. Humility is not a weakness. And determination doesn’t have to lack humility. **We are called to be both humble and strong-minded!**²⁵ **We can and should be humble and self-effacing and even meek in the way that we interact with others. And at the same time, we can have a deep, abiding, convictional stick-to-itiveness. We don’t give up on Christ, his**

²¹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 212: “The tears of a servant of God are not in vain. The psalmist wrote in Psalm 126:6, ‘He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.’ To those with caring, compassionate hearts, who faithfully spread the precious seed of the Word, God promises a rich spiritual harvest.”

²² Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, 264.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 210–1: “Two attitudes mark a bond-servant of the Lord. First, such service must be rendered in all humility... Second, serving the Lord involves a willingness to endure suffering.”

church, and his people. We rage on the inside with determination, even as we exude humility, brokenness, and kindness on the outside.

And let me say this too. A lot of the times determination isn't about hard work and muscling through the challenges of ministry and grinding it out. More often it's about forgiveness. In my own experience, more people quit on God and the church because of unforgiveness than because of laziness or apathy. And forgiveness is an aspect of humility.

If we're going to finish life well in service to the Lord, then you're going to have to forgive, and you're going to have to embrace what it means to "serve the Lord with humility and with tears." **There will be tears.**

Secondly, write this down as #2. You want to be able to say this at the end of your life:

2) "I didn't hesitate to **speak** of my **Savior**" (Acts 20:20-21)

Look at **verse 20** with me. By the way, the controlling verb of this statement is the "You yourselves know" in **verse 18**. So, Paul says, "**You know...**

²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable,

"I didn't hesitate," says Paul. **"I didn't shrink back!"**

The Greek word for "shrink from" here is ὑποστέλλω (*hypostellō*), and it literally means "to retreat from a position" or militarily "fall back." It connotes fear and a lack of faith.²⁶

And with Paul's phrasing here he uses a double negative, which for us in English is nonsensical, but in Greek it's used for emphasis. So Paul says literally, "I did not... not" shrink back. We might colloquialize it this way, **"I never, ever, ever, shrank back."** You can sense the emotion in Paul's voice here.

You can sense his conviction as he says, **"Whatever was good for you, whatever was profitable, I didn't hold back."** **"If there was something that they needed to hear, even if it was hard for me to communicate it, even if my life was threatened, I didn't hold back."**²⁷ **"I loved you enough to speak truth even when it was inconvenient for me."**²⁸

Now what does that look like in our own day? Well it looks something like this: (1) **"I love you brother. I care about you. But this pornography addiction of yours is killing you and your family. You've got to end it. I'll help you as much as I can, but you can't do this anymore."**

It looks something like this: (2) **"Listen brother so-and-so... Listen sister so-and-so... I love you, but you've got a real attitude problem. You are believing the lies of the enemy and you are fixating on things that harm you. You've got to renew your mind. You've got to Philippians 4:8, "Think on those things that are true and honorable and just and pure and commendable and excellent and praise-worthy."**

Here's another example of what not shrinking back looks like: (3) **"You really believe this Jesus stuff!" "Yes, I believe it. And you should too, because it's the truth. We are all sinners who need forgiveness and Christ's blood can wash away your sins and restore you to right relationship with your Maker. And even now you can have your sins forgiven and experience the newness of life that only God gives. Would you like to give your life to him right now?" **That's what not shrinking back looks like.****

Let's keep going in **verse 20**. Paul says...

²⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 840: "The verb (ὑποστέλλω) can denote 'to be timid, to be silent,' which would mean that Paul emphasizes the boldness and frankness of his preaching. Or the verb can denote here 'to withhold, to hold back,' which would mean that Paul emphasizes the completeness of his preaching in which he did not withhold the truth. There is no reason why both meanings could not be intended. The point is that Paul has spoken about the gospel with the result that people heard what was spoken, always with a reaction—some accepting his message while others opposed it."

²⁷ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 208: "The apostle's successful ministry flowed from his devotion to truth, spiritual character, commitment to serving God, and the resultant powerful example his life set for others. There was no credibility gap between the truth he proclaimed and the way he lived."

²⁸ Mohler, *Acts 13-28 for You*, 112: "Paul's style of leadership provides a helpful and desperately needed paradigm for Christian leaders in the 21st century. Leading in ministry involves backroom vision-casting and executive leadership. So leadership is not less than that, but it is also more. Ministry also consists of service, teaching the saints, and preaching the gospel of repentance. In essence, Christian ministry must be about people and bringing them to Christ."

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house,²⁹

In other words it wasn't just at church on Sundays. It wasn't just from the pulpit that Paul was bold and truthful. Paul says, **"I came to your homes."**

Probably there was a significant network of house churches in Ephesus. They didn't have a big church building. That would come later. But we know that Paul spoke in large gatherings, because we read in **Acts 19** that Paul was reasoning with the Jews in the synagogues. Also he taught in the hall of Tyrannus to large groups of people (**19:8–9**). So Paul wasn't afraid to teach publicly. But he taught privately from house to house in smaller groups as well. **John Calvin** said once that public teaching which is given to everyone together will often grow cold unless it is helped by advice given in private.³⁰

And not only was Paul *teaching*, he was also *testifying*. Look at **verse 21**. Paul could teach the Scriptures and he could preach the gospel. He did both.

²¹ *testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance³¹ toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.³²*

Verse 21 is a really important verse because it encapsulates the two-fold process of salvation. There's repentance and faith.³³ There's no salvation without repentance.³⁴ There's no salvation without faith. **Faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin.**³⁵ And Paul is saying here, **"I didn't hesitate to speak of my savior."** **"I didn't shrink back, when given the opportunity, to tell people about new life in Christ."**³⁶

And by the way, some of the elders were obviously converts of Paul's. Paul says to these guys, "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia." How would these guys know what Paul was like when he first rolled into town? The answer is that these guys weren't saved. They were pagan Gentiles or unconverted Jews.³⁷ Paul led them to Christ. And now they are leading the church!

²⁹ CHRYSOSTOM: "This shows his long toil, great earnestness and endurance." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 250.

³⁰ John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 244: "Publicly, and throughout every house. This is the second point, that he did not only teach all men in the congregation, but also every one privately, as every man's necessity did require. For Christ hath not appointed pastors upon this condition, that they may only teach the Church in general in the open pulpit; but that they may take charge of every particular sheep, that they may bring back to the sheepfold those which wander and go astray, that they may strengthen those which are discouraged and weak, that they may cure the sick, that they may lift up and set on foot the feeble, (Ezek. 34:4;) for common doctrine will oftentimes wax cold, unless it be holpen with private admonitions."

³¹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 216–7: "The New Testament knows nothing of a gospel that lacks a call to repentance. John the Baptist insisted that his hearers 'bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance' (Luke 3:8). The Lord Jesus Christ also called people to repent (Matt. 4:17); in fact, He described His ministry as one of calling sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). Paul's message to both Jews and Gentiles was 'that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance' (Acts 26:20). The words of the Lord Jesus Christ that 'repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem' (Luke 24:47; cf. Acts 17:30), mark repentance as central to the gospel message."

³² Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 627: "The beneficial message is the same to Jews and Greeks: repentance to God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1:9–10; 1 Cor. 9:20–23; 10:32–33). This combination is an excellent summary of Paul's mission. Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin (repentance for Paul: Acts 17:30; 26:18, 20; faith: 11:17; 14:23; 16:31; 20:21; 24:24; Gal. 2:16; 3:26; Phil. 1:29; Fitzmyer 1998: 677; OT roots: Jer. 34:15; 26:3–5; Hos. 6:1–3; Larkin 1995: 294). This view is defended grammatically by Wallace (1996: 289), who argues that this is not a chiasm, where faith is what Jews do and repentance is the response of Gentiles."

³³ HEINRICH BULLINGER: "There are two things that the gospel teaches: contrition (*poenitentia*), which is repentance of mind and life, and faith, which is founded on Christ Jesus' death and stirs up courage (*fidutia*). Indeed these things should be proclaimed not only to Jews, but also to all Gentiles." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 281.

³⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 840–1: "Repentance is necessary because all people, both Jews and Gentiles, have sinned and face God's wrath of judgment (Rom 1:18–3:20)."

³⁵ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 33: "Paul did not preach an easy-believism but rather the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation, which results in a changed life."

³⁶ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 113: "Today, some Christian circles aim to modify this gospel. A proponent within this movement might claim that Jews, Muslims, and Christians worship the same God. This simply is not true. Christians are the only ones who worship the one true God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

³⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 838n1765: "The reference to the 'first day' (ἀπὸ πρώτης ἡμέρας) on which Paul 'set foot in the province of Asia' (ἐπέβην εἰς τὴν Ἀσίαν) indicates that at least some of the elders were among the first converts in Ephesus, which may suggest that some of them had been converted during the ministry of Apollos (18:24–28) and that some of them had been disciples of John the Baptist (20:1–7)."

I didn't put this down as an explicit point from today's message. But let's just make this a bonus point since we dealt with this last time. One of the things that you want to say at the end of your life is I passed the torch on to others. I disciplined others. I replicated myself in others. Paul was able to say that. I want to be able to say that too.

Thirdly, you want to be able to say this at the end of your life.

3) "I valued the Lord and his gospel as more **precious** than **self**" (Acts 20:22–24)³⁸

Jesus said this, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (**Mark 8:34–36**).

Paul says something similar here.³⁹ Look at **verse 22**.

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.⁴⁰

Paul has no misgivings about what's going to happen to him in the future. He knows that suffering and imprisonment await him in Jerusalem. Because they don't like him there. And remember that was part of Jesus's prophecy over his life when he got saved. "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (**Acts 9:16**).⁴¹ This was always part of God's plan for Paul's life.

But he says in **verse 24**.

²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course⁴² and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus,⁴³ to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.⁴⁴

If this whole passage sounds familiar, it's because there are a lot of parallels here with **2 Timothy 4:7–8**. Paul says there, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."⁴⁵ If you read a commentary on **Acts 20**, the commentator will almost certainly mention how many similarities there are between Luke's account of Paul's message here to the Ephesians and the end of Paul's second letter to Timothy, which coincidentally was written to Timothy as he was serving in Ephesus.

And in both of those passages—both **2 Timothy 4** and **Acts 20**—Paul talks about finishing well. In **2 Timothy 4** it's past tense. "**I'm done. I've finished well.**" Here, approximately ten years before that in **Acts 20**, it's not past tense. Paul's saying, "**I want to finish well. I'm driven to finish well. The Holy Spirit is sending**

³⁸ HEINRICH BULLINGER: "Death is indeed harsh, and more horrible for the body than is able to be said, but the mind is to be comforted by the goodness of heavenly things, which will undoubtedly follow those who have scorned earthly things.... Your salvation is dearer to you than life, just as his ministry was dearer to Paul than even his own life. He preferred to risk his life rather than not to follow that ministry strenuously." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 282.

³⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 628: "Whatever he may face, Paul does not regard his life as being of ultimate value (2 Cor. 4:7–12; 6:4–10; 12:9–10; Phil. 2:17; 3:8; 2 Tim. 4:7)."

⁴⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 841–2: "Paul does not know the sequence of events nor the outcome of his imprisonment. He had been imprisoned in Philippi but was released (16:19–40), and he had been arrested and brought before the governor of the province of Achaia but was let go (18:12–17). He does not know all the details, but he knows (μη̄ εἰδώς, πλὴν) that he will be imprisoned."

⁴¹ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 33: A commitment to Christ that superseded self-interest had been the pattern of his life ever since his Damascus conversion when Christ told Ananias, 'I will show him how much he must suffer for my name' (9:16)."

⁴² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 842: "The Greek term δρόμος describes the run in a stadium (στάδιον) from one end to the other and the race course itself, which, depending on the stadium, was between 175 and 208 yards (160 and 190 m.) in length."

⁴³ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNCT, 212: "Some judge the success of a servant of God by how large or widespread his ministry is, how many degrees he has, or how much publicity he receives. But the true measure of a servant of God is whether he focuses solely on pleasing God, which gives him the willingness to serve with humility and suffer opposition from those hostile to the truth."

⁴⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 425: "That ministry is described as his testimony to the 'gospel of God's grace.' Oddly, that exact phrase never occurs in the epistles of Paul. One could scarcely summarize the heart of Paul's message better than the 'good news of God's grace.'"

⁴⁵ For parallels, see the following sermons on 2 Timothy:

- 1) Tony Caffey, "The Art of Finishing Well (Part 1)," 10-06-24: <https://www.messiahbible.org/2-timothy-4-6-15-the-art-of-finishing-well-part-1>
- 2) Tony Caffey, "The Arth of Finishing Well (Part 2)," 10-13-24: <https://www.messiahbible.org/2-timothy-4-16-22-the-art-of-finishing-well-part-2>

me to Jerusalem. That means imprisonment and almost certain death. If that's the case, so be it. I value obedience to God as more precious than life itself. I value the spread of his gospel as more valuable than my own life."⁴⁶

Have you ever heard anyone say, "Well, the important thing is your health! At least you have your health!" You ever hear people say that? But nobody says that at a funeral, right? "The important thing about so-and-so was his health." I've never said that at a funeral.

But Paul says here explicitly that health is *not* the most important thing. What's more important than that? The gospel! Serving Christ! Testifying to the gospel of God's grace! Finishing the race well! And if we die early, so be it. "To live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). We can't lose.

In the 1800s, there was a young missionary to the Fiji Islands named James Calvert (1813–1892). And the Fiji Islands were not a vacation destination back then. The islands were filled with cannibals. And Calvert went to convert them. And the ship captain who took him and his team to those islands said, "You will lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go among such savages." And Calvert replied, "We died before we came."⁴⁷

Remember again Jesus's words, "Whoever would save their life will lose it, whoever loses their life for my sake and the gospel will save it." **You want to be able to say this at the end of your life, "I valued the Lord and his gospel as more precious than self."**⁴⁸

Now there are two objections that I need to deal with at this point, and then I'll close. One of the objections to this line of reasoning goes like this, **"Isn't Paul's attitude towards self a little masochistic? Isn't this a kind of self-loathing that Paul is exhibiting? Is this really healthy for a believer?"** That's one objection.

Here's my answer to that. I don't think that Paul was masochistic or self-loathing. I think he valued obedience to God and the fulfillment of his mission as the most important duty of a Christian. That's not self-loathing; that's Christ-exalting. That's not masochism; that's servant-mindedness or "slave-mindedness" towards Christ.

And here's what I believe. I believe that there is a kind of selflessness and self-sacrifice that is actually healthy and good and joyful for the Christian. I've experienced it. I believe that being a slave to Christ is one of the most joyful and liberating realities in the world. Counterintuitive maybe, but it's true.

And on the other side of that, there is a self-focus and self-preservation that leads to misery. In my experience, selfish people are the most miserable people in the world. Don't you agree? And I can see that even in myself. My selfishness leads to my worst bouts of misery. Our self-esteem needs to come from who we are in Christ. Our self-worth comes from our identity in Christ. Paul knew that and embraced it even if that meant he lost his life.

(2) Now the second objection that I can hear already goes something like this. **"Tony, I'm a twenty-something. I'm a Gen-Zer. Why do I need to start thinking about finishing well? I've only started this life. I've got my whole life ahead of me. I'll start thinking about finishing well when I'm old, like you."** Now I've addressed this before, and maybe some of you are tired of hearing me say this, but I'm going to say it again. And I'm going to keep saying it. Nobody has promised us tomorrow. None of us knows how many days God has given us on planet earth. Jesus could come back tomorrow, and Jesus could call you home this afternoon.

⁴⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 425: "The activity of the Spirit could be seen as contradictory here. On the one hand, Paul was driven on to Jerusalem. On the other hand, he was warned of the extreme risk in going there. These messages of the Spirit were not at odds. Paul was indeed being led to Jerusalem. God had a purpose for his going there. The warnings prepared him for what awaited him in Jerusalem and assured him that whatever happened, God was in it. Paul would undergo severe trials in Jerusalem, but through them he would ultimately bear his witness in Rome, which was his own heart's desire (cf. 19:21; Rom 1:9f.)."

⁴⁷ Taken from Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 33.

⁴⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 840: "Christian preaching is not a rhetorical event for the promotion of the fame of the speaker and for the entertainment of the audience. It is more consequential than the education of the youth taught by knowledgeable teachers, and more serious than the situation in a court of law where witnesses relate what they have seen and heard. Christian preaching is critical because it informs about the revelation of God's grace and God's judgment in the coming of his Messiah."

And I want you to be able to say at a moment's notice, even if Christ came this week, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

I want you be able to say:

- 1) "I served the Lord with **humility** and **determination**" (Acts 20:17-19)
- 2) "I didn't hesitate to **speak** of my **Savior**" (Acts 20:20-21)
- 3) "I valued the Lord and his gospel as more **precious** than **self**" (Acts 20:22-24)

I'll close with this. Several years ago I read a great book by John Piper entitled *Don't Waste Your Life*.⁴⁹ It altered the course of my life. In many ways it altered my preaching style. It gave it more urgency.

And there was a poem that Piper mentioned in that book called "Only One Life" by C.T. Studd. It goes like this.

*"Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.
And when I am dying, how happy I'll be,
If the lamp of my life has been burned out for Thee.
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last."*⁵⁰

I think I've come to terms with the fact that part of my job description as a pastor is helping people put their lives in perspective. Because let's face it, we are distracted. We are bombarded with advertisements and marketing and pleas for our undivided attention.

And we live in a fast world with a lot of moving parts. Every time I buy a computer, I spend forever trying to figure it out. And just when I get comfortable with the latest software, they switch to something else and I've got to start all over again. It's maddening.

And I feel like all of life is like that. You're a hamster on a wheel. And if you're not careful, and if you don't get reminded of these eternal things from time to time, you'll wake up at age 60 and say, "I've wasted my life chasing things that don't last forever."

Now we need computers. We need to know how to use them. And we need to work. And we need to mow the lawn, and change the oil, and buy groceries, and go to the dentist. I get it. And you need time for rest and relaxation. We're not robots that can work without rest. I'm not here to make you feel guilty about those things.

But I am here to remind you... Paul is telling the Ephesian elders what matters most... We need these reminders. I need these reminders.

*"Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.
And when I am dying, how happy I'll be,
If the lamp of my life has been burned out for Thee.
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last."*

⁴⁹ John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003). The entire book can be read at the Desiring God website: <https://www.desiringgod.org/books/dont-waste-your-life>

⁵⁰ Quoted in Ibid.