

PARTING IS SUCH SWEET SORROW

Lesson 15

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DEVOTIONAL

They all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing . . . that they would see his face no more (Acts 20:37–38).

Saying goodbye to someone you love can be awkward and difficult. Down deep you wonder, Will I ever see this person again? You almost wish you had never gotten so attached. It hurts so much to let go.

I thought of this as I looked at some pictures a young woman had collected during her high school years. She talked to me about several students from abroad who had become her dear friends. When I asked how she had grown so attached to them, she replied, “I don’t know. But it sure was hard to say goodbye!”

Sooner or later, we all will experience the tears of separation. The apostle Paul nurtured and taught the believers in Ephesus for 3 years. But when he had to leave, “*They all wept freely, . . . sorrowing . . . that they would see his face no more*” (Acts 20:37–38).

As Christians, we have good reason to establish close ties, even though they will eventually be broken. Our hope in the resurrection to come assures us that someday we will be reunited in the presence of God.

Farewells can be very painful. But don’t let that keep you from building close relationships with others who love the Lord. He makes those friendships worthwhile—both now and in eternity!

Farewells and partings may bring grief;
The sorrow can be hard to bear;
But someday those who know the Lord
Will meet in heaven with Him there. —Sper

Christians never say goodbye for the last time.¹

¹ Our Daily Bread devotional by Mart DeHaan found @ <https://odb.org/2000/03/01/painful-farewells/> © 2018 Our Daily Bread Ministries

OPEN IT

1. When have you had to consider a difficult parting or goodbye? What made it so difficult, and how have you been able to overcome the grief or sadness surrounding it?

READ IT

Acts 20:17-38

EXPLORE IT

2. How does Paul describe his ministry and service to the Lord and the Ephesians in verse 18–22?
3. What did Paul say would bring his life value and purpose in verse 24?
4. What two things were the Ephesian elders to pay close attention to?
5. What concern did Paul have for the church once he departed?
6. What did Paul do before he left his dear friends? How did they respond?

APPLY IT

Paul loved the church. And he had a particular love for the church at Ephesus—the church in which, as far as we know, he spent more time than any other church (with the exception of Antioch). Paul stayed in Ephesus for three years, and his impact there, and the later impact of the church there, was felt far and wide. He experienced supernatural community there.

But as we reach Acts 20 in Luke’s recounting of the acts of the apostles, we learn that Paul expects to leave Ephesus for good. He does not expect to see the Ephesians again (vv. 25, 38). Acts 20:17–38 therefore form Paul’s parting words to this church, and parting words are always significant.²

- 7. What are some things that you love about your church? If you had to move away, what things would be important to look for in a new church?**

ELDERS: GOD’S MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

Paul was deeply committed to the church and to its welfare. He had more insight into the church than anyone else at that point of history, for God had revealed the full “mystery” of the church to him (see Ephesians 2). He had cared deeply for this particular community of faith. He still cared for it. And so he called for a meeting of its elders—those entrusted with its care. The elders had been enlisted, equipped, and entrusted to care for this flock. Now, once again, they would be exhorted—with specific reference to their expectations as elders.³

- 8. Read 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Hebrews 13:7, 17 and 1 Peter 5:1–4. What are elders and, according to these passages, what is their role within the church?**

How do the elders function at your church? How are they selected and what tasks are they given? Do these fit the biblical guidelines and activities for elders?

² Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/caring-for-the-community/>

³ Ibid.

As the visible, vulnerable Christian leader he was not cold, aloof, or distant. He got down and dirty, up close and personal, where they could see and know him...warts and all! ⁴

9. Why is it so important for church leaders to be transparent and real about their life and Christian walk? How can such authenticity be abused by others in the congregation?

10. What can happen as church leaders and members live life as Paul did, open and transparent before one another? What types of things can keep people from such a biblical ideal? What steps can we take in our groups to foster such relationships?

LAYING IT ON THE LINE

Paul, who had been so deeply changed by grace, taught the gospel of grace to everyone, everywhere. Here, then, is another wonderful example for us to follow. Don't shrink back from teaching anything that's profitable—even if it's in the Old Testament! Be bold in your exposition in this age of tolerance. Don't cave in to culture, but lovingly and courageously teach the "whole plan of God" (v. 27). There's not really a bad place to teach the gospel! And everyone needs the gospel! As we teach the gospel—behind pulpits, in homes, in coffee shops, in parks—let's call people to repentance and faith just as Paul did. He and others simply continued the preaching ministry of the Lord Jesus himself (Matthew 4: 17).⁵

11. Twice in our passage Paul says he "did not shrink" from proclaiming truth (vv. 20, 27). What types of things taught in Scripture might a church leader steer clear of due to pushback from within the church as well as in the culture around us?

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 6910–6915). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

Whether in public or in private, the servant of Jesus Christ does not fail to declare **the profitable truths of God's Word**. And in the preparation and the proclamation, he handles the Scripture as a "*workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15).⁶

- 12. Paul says that he spoke the word of God to the people because it was profitable. How is biblical teaching from church leaders profitable to the members of the congregation? When have you experienced such "profit" in the church?**

BAD MOON RISING

In this section Luke replaces the "you know... you know..." of the previous paragraph with "I know (23)..., I know (25) ..., I know (29)". For Paul turns from the past which they knew to the future which the Holy Spirit was teaching him and which he now shared with them. The same Holy Spirit who warns him in every town (perhaps through prophets) of prison and hardships (23), nevertheless compels him to keep travelling to Jerusalem (22).

For his overriding concern is not at all costs to survive, but rather that he may finish the race and complete his Christ-given task of bearing witness to the good news of God's grace (24). And Paul knows something else. His prophetic eyes peer beyond Jerusalem and his sufferings there to the mission visits to Rome and to Spain of which he is still dreaming. It must be for this reason that he knows that none of them will see him again (25). This face adds a poignant finality to the occasion. He makes a solemn declaration that, as a watchman like Ezekiel, he is innocent of everybody's blood (26). His conscience is clear. He has not shrunk from proclaiming to them God's whole purpose of salvation (27). Consequently, he cannot be held responsible if any of them might perish.⁷

- 13. How does living in light of eternity help us to remain full of joy and hope as we endure hardships in this life? Can such a heavenly mindset ever be detrimental to a Christian's life on earth?**

To finish the course, Paul said that he needed "*to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God*" (20:24). Not everyone is called to be a preacher or missionary, as Paul was. But with whatever gifts God has entrusted to us, the bottom line is the same: we must be faithful by our lives and words to the gospel of the grace of God. If our lives and words betray the gospel of God's grace, we are in some sense guilty of the blood of those who were tainted by our failure (20:26). If our lives and our words bear witness to the gospel of God's grace, we are innocent of the blood of those who came in contact with our witness.

Paul here is referring to God's words to Ezekiel, that He had appointed him as a watchman over Israel. If the watchman sees the enemy coming and doesn't sound the warning, he is liable for the city's destruction. But if he sounds the warning and the people ignore him, he has delivered himself; their blood is on their own heads (Ezekiel 3:17–21; 33:1–9).⁸

⁶ MacArthur, John. *Acts 13–28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series)* (Kindle Locations 4055–4057). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Stott, John. *The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series)* (Kindle Locations 5981–5990). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-52-finishing-course-acts-2022-27>

14. Do believers carry any level of guilt or ownership for someone else's non-belief? In what ways might we be guilty of shirking our duty as Christ's ambassadors? How do we balance our calling to proclaim the gospel and people's responsibility to believe?

LOOKING OUT FOR #1...BUT DON'T FORGET OTHERS

Having looked back to his ministry in Ephesus (which they know) and on to his coming sufferings and separation from them (which he knows), Paul now gives them his final charge. The past and the future will together shape their present ministry. In essence, his appeal is for vigilance: "Keep watch!" (28). "Be on your guard!" (31).⁹

15. While Paul is speaking primarily to church elders, there is a universal truth for all believers—"Pay careful attention to yourself and others." What does this look like and why is such an endeavor necessary?

Charles Spurgeon said this to his students: When we say to you, my dear brethren, take care of your life, we mean be careful of even the minutiae of your character. Avoid little debts, unpunctuality, gossiping, nicknaming, petty quarrels, and all other of those little vices which fill the ointment with flies ("Lectures to My Students," 20– 21).¹⁰

16. What areas of your life need some attention? What needs to be done so that change can happen?

17. How does an elder keep watch over the flock? How would you respond to someone who says, "Since we are all adults, can't we just look out for ourselves?"

⁹ Stott, John. *The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series)* (Kindle Locations 5991-5993). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 6948-6951). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

- 18. Paul warned of wolves coming and wreaking havoc in the church. These wolves would bring dangerous doctrines into the church (“speaking twisted things” [ESV]). What twisted things have infiltrated churches that we must steer clear of today?**

Our text also shows us the result of elders who are characterized by the above: They are elders who are trusted and treasured. *“And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul’s neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship”* (vv. 36–38).

How sad it would have been if these elders had simply high-fived Paul and told him that they would see him around. That is not what happened. There was a great deal of weeping involved in this parting. These elders knew that they would deeply miss Paul and they were willing to show their affection for him. These are the kinds of elders the church needs.... Biblical elders are all of the above—and therefore they are treasured by the community.

Elders who care for the community will be dear to the community. When they leave, they will be missed. Are you an elder? Then strive to be characterized by the above. Do you aspire to be an elder? Then aspire to be characterized by the above. Are you a church member? Then aspire to be such a church member. Are you looking for a church? Then look for a church whose leaders—and whose members—aspire to be characterized by the above.

- 19. Paul reminds elders that their leadership should never be connected to the love of money. How can such selfish ministry negatively impact a church body?**

- 20. God longs for elder teams that love one another and care for the flock under their care, and in turn he calls church members to pray for and submit to the biblical leadership of their elders. How does one evaluate or discern if such things are alive and well in their local church setting?**