

Journey 3: An Exhortation to Elders

Acts 20:1–38

Studies in Acts #25

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Paul's third missionary journey has led him to the great city of Ephesus, where he has spent roughly three years. A three year ministry. On the one hand that doesn't seem like enough time to do anything but on the other it's his longest stint in one place yet as far as we can tell. For me three years is the time between tonight and when Sadie was born. It's long time! So now Paul prepares to depart to return to Jerusalem. And before leaving he **called the elders of the church to come to him** (v. 17) so he could exhort them.

I want you to quickly note several features of his ministry in Ephesus before we get to what I really want to focus on tonight. You see the *nature* of Paul's ministry here was **with all humility and with tears and with trials** (v. 19). He lived among them, felt their pain, and suffered as their pastor. You see the *content* of his ministry was **declaring to you...[what] was profitable** (v. 20) and **the whole counsel of God** (v. 27), which is defined as **repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ** (v. 21). You see the *method* of his ministry was **teaching you in public and from house to house** (v. 20), both preaching and in visiting. And finally you see the *scope* of his ministry was to **Jews and...Greeks** (v. 21), seeking to reach everyone for Christ. This really is a ministry to behold! It was this chapter that was the inspiration for Richard Baxter's classic book of pastoral theology called *The Reformed Pastor*.

What I want to focus on especially tonight is Paul's exhortation to the elders of Ephesus in verses 28–35.

Pay Attention

Paul's first big exhortation is in verse 28: **pay careful attention**. Children, you've this before: "pay attention to the lines as you write your letters, pay attention to the tree branch hanging over the sidewalk as you walk." We need to pay attention to our ourselves and our surroundings.

First, Paul exhorts the elders to pay attention *to yourself* (v. 28). Brothers, you need to guard your hearts, your minds, and your lives from sin. I was just re-reading Matthew 5 recently in connection with the Ten Commandments and was re-impressed with how Jesus focuses not only on external obedience, but how heart-obedience first leads to external obedience. You need to guard yourselves for the sake of your own sanctification; you need to guard yourselves for the sake of your family; you need to guard yourselves for the sake of your congregation. A dear friend of mine recently went through a major struggle with his associate pastor, who was led off into sins of envy and pride because he wasn't guarding his heart. Now the church is recovering from the effects of his attempted *coup d'etat*.

Second, Paul exhorts the elders to pay attention *to the flock* (v. 28). And note how he describes this: **in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers** (v. 28). That word **overseer** is the Greek word *episkopos*, one who looks over. Brothers, your task is huge: to oversee the spiritual life of the congregation as a whole and each sheep in particular.

Know people's needs. Know who's here. Know who's missing. Follow-up on needs you know about and have addressed. Listen to the Word preached for purity. Guard the Lord's Table. Discipline the wayward. It's a huge task, isn't it?

Brothers and sisters, as Paul exhorts our elders here I exhort you. Pray for your elders. They are overwhelmed with the task. They are overwhelmed by the burdens. Know they are men, too. They have jobs. They have families. Be considerate. They need encouragement too. How have you been praying for them? How have you encouraged them?

Pastor the Flock

The second big exhortation here is *pastor the flock*. Note the different words Paul uses here for these men and how they all speak of the same men. He calls them **elders** in verse 17. This is their office. He calls them **overseers** in verse 28. This is their duty. He calls them **shepherds** in verse 28. When our ESV says **care for the church of God**, that word case is the word for shepherd. This is their attitude. How are the elders to shepherd or pastor?

First, shepherds are to *pasture* their sheep. **Care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood** (v. 28). How did Jesus, the Good Shepherd, feed his sheep the disciples? By teaching them the Word. Peter said of Jesus' words that they were the words of eternal life (John 6).

Second, shepherds are to *protect* their sheep. Notice verses 29–30: **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. Notice how the false pastors, called **fierce wolves** here, do not spare the flock: it is through words. As Paul says to Timothy, who was the pastor in Ephesus later on, “the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1), and again, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Elders, you have to be on guard because these wolves come in from the outside as verse 29 says and they also arise from within as verse 30 says. We’ve had both in this congregation over the years. Be on guard.

A Promise

Who is sufficient of himself for these things? Brothers and sisters, your elders feel inadequate; encourage them. And let me show you how briefly. Notice Paul’s promise to the Ephesian elders in verse 32: **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.** How can you encourage your elders? And elders, how can you grow in your ability to oversee and shepherd? The Word of God! Guard the purity of the Word by knowing the Word. Encourage with the Word by growing in the Word yourself. It is **able to build you up** because it is the living and powerful Word of the Lord.