

Church 2.0

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

(Acts 1:8 ESV)

To The Elders in Ephesus: Finish Well

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Acts 20:17-38

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The Christian life is like a race.

Like a marathon, it's long, demanding, and requires endurance. But like a sprint relay, it's over in a heartbeat, and requires clean handoffs to get across the finish line with the baton. The whole point of any race is **to run in a way that you finish**. It's not to run aimlessly or meander for amusement. **It's to run strong and finish well.**

“Run so as to win the prize,” Paul urges us in 1 Corinthians 9:24.

How we run now determines how well we will finish. NOW matters for LATER. It's true for us who follow Jesus; it's especially so for our leaders, because as go the leaders, so goes the flock.

Today, as we return to the book of Acts, we'll hear the apostle Paul speak to leaders, to the elders from the church in Ephesus, pressing them to run, to lead, so that they and their flock finish well. Paul knows he's not likely to see these men again, so he 'passes the baton', discharging himself and charging them with the responsibility he has carried till now. These men are gathered, not in Ephesus as you might expect, but 30 miles away on the coast, on a sandy beach where Paul has summoned them. We'll find them in Acts chapter 20, starting in v17 (p 929 of your church Bible).

But wait Steve, haven't we skipped a chapter? Yes, a lot has happened since we last saw the apostle Paul in Corinth in chapter 18. There (remember last week?) the Lord urged him to stick it out and keep on speaking—which he did for 18 months. But the time comes to wrap up his

2nd missionary journey, and he makes a brief stopover in Ephesus (18:20-21) where they beg him to stay. 'No,' he says, 'but I'll be back.'

He keeps his word on his 3rd missionary journey, lands back Ephesus (19:1), and settles in to teach for an extended period of about 2 years (see 19:10?). God blesses those efforts ...

... so that **all the residents of Asia** heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." (Acts 19:10, ESV)

Paul's strategy of investing extended time in this urban hub pays off! God's Word echoes from Ephesus all over the region. The Gospel begins to change lives. And as idol worshippers begin to reject their manmade idols to worship the Living Lord, the local merchants who fabricate and push those idols go, "Well, Jesus is bad for business," and they push back hard. They stir up a riot, and Paul moves on.

But the Ephesian church stays close to his heart. He longs to reconnect with the church leaders, so he calls for them to meet him on the coast, within eyeshot of the boat that will soon take him to Jerusalem.

And that's where we pick up the story, beginning in v 17.

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink

from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. 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. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. 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. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. 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. ³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship. (Acts 20:17-38, ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This speech of Paul's is the only one in the book of Acts specifically addressed to Christian leaders. It's a 'baton pass' where he places his example as the model to follow in v 24:

²⁴ 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. (Acts 20:24, ESV)

Leaders, here's

How to Run Now so as to Finish Well

Paul sensed he was nearing the end of his race. There's an urgency! "Brother shepherds, I want you to run like I have run."

Now even though Paul's remarks are aimed at elders (that's maybe what, 10 people in this room?), what he says is helpful for us ALL (for leaders AND followers, for shepherds AND their flock). We ALL need to understand and practice the priorities of faithful spiritual leadership.

To finish well ...

1. Preach the Whole Counsel of God. (v. 21,24,27)

Tell the entire truth from God. Not just the tasty parts, teach the tough parts, too.

The priority task of every Christian—leader OR follower—is

... **to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.** (v24) Speak the truth as you would in a court of law, testify, bear witness, give evidence to the good news that has come at God's expense, at God's initiative, as a gift from God in the person of Jesus Christ. Tell the whole truth, not just part of it.

God so loved the world that he gave us His Son (Jn 3:16). That's good news. The entire truth, however, is that we must believe in Him or we perish. Those who do NOT believe are condemned already (Jn 3:17). That's tough to hear, but it's the necessary truth.

This is the evidence (1 Jn 5:11-12 says): God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life ... that's good news. The whole truth is ... whoever does NOT have the Son of God does NOT have life.

That's God's message we are to take and tell as we run our days.

In v 24 Paul described our priority task as testifying to the "gospel of the grace of God." In v. 21 he describes it as testifying

... of **repentance toward God** and of **faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.** (Acts 20:21, ESV)

When we proclaim the total truth, we must also call for a saving response, **repentance** and **faith.**

The good news from God is NOT "you're okay, I'm okay, we're all okay." It's NOT "God is love", "Jesus is our friend", "let's live good lives like Jesus did". Those messages won't ever result in **repentance toward God** and **faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.**

The whole truth starts with the hard truth from God that we are sinful rebels against God our Maker, that God is holy, that holy God must punish our sin, that He sent his Son Jesus to take that punishment in our place when he died and rose again, that Jesus alone vanquishes sin and death and hell. We must proclaim that message so clearly, that the saving response God sparks in the soul of a sinner is ... “O God, forgive me! I turn from my sin. Lord Jesus, save me as You alone can!”

Thank God for the complete picture we have in His Word of WHO HE IS and of our human predicament: We’re in eternal danger. Only Jesus can rescue us. The whole Bible is what makes that good news make good sense.

That’s why Paul says, (in v27)

“I didn’t shrink from declaring to you **the whole counsel of God.**” (Acts 20:27, ESV)

Christ-lover, elder, (you who are the flock of God, you who watch over the flock of God) if we want to run so as to finish well, our number one priority is to get a good grasp on the good news and take it and tell it, **proclaim the whole counsel of God.**

And do it ... Paul adds

2. As One Serving the One High King. (v.18-19, 22-24, 33-35)

Paul began this talk to the Ephesian elders by saying,

“You yourselves know **how I lived among you the whole time** from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹**servicing the Lord** ... (Acts 20:18-19a, ESV)

Those leaders knew what propelled Paul. They'd watched from the first day, and for years, how Paul spent himself **servicing the Lord**. Never a hint of self-service, of self-promotion, even of self-preservation. His singular intent was to spend himself for the Lord who chased him down on the road to Damascus, and saved even "ME—the worst of sinners" (1 Tim 1:15). Paul never got over that! That FUELED Paul. **Servicing the Lord** filled Paul with boldness to speak the Gospel (v19) "with all humility, with tears, with trials, through the plots of the Jews." **Servicing the Lord** kept him teaching (v 20) in public places and from house to house. And **servicing the Lord** propelled Paul toward Jerusalem, though that meant certain imprisonment and affliction.

Paul would rather grip His Savior than clutch any comfort. You can only let go of self-preservation, if you're clutching a far greater treasure. "I will spend myself for Him who spent Himself for me. My life would be a waste any other way."

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as **working for the Lord**, not for men. ... **It is the Lord Christ you are serving.** (Col 3:23)

Let it be your earnest expectation and hope (Phil 1:20) to not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness **Christ shall even now as always be exalted** in your body—whether by life or by death.

That's what kept Paul from living like a TAKER ... (see v33?)

³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. (Acts 20:33-34, ESV)

NO, Paul lived like a GIVER ...

³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:35, ESV)

Brothers and sisters, whether or not you are an elder, you are a leader and leaders GIVE. Leaders SACRIFICE. Leaders don't take from the people under their care, they PROVIDE for those people.

When we serve like Jesus did, we won't GIVE to GET. We won't give to GET NOTICED. We'll give, because the Niagara of God's grace flows into us and overflows from us.

THIS is how to run if we are to finish well. 1) Proclaim the whole counsel of God. 2) As one serving the One High King. And thirdly,

3. Being vigilant for any and all threats. (v25-31)

Paul leans in here. He knows he has to say some things that are hard to hear. He loves these men. They've served their One High King together, taking hits for Him in the trenches. There's no comradery like one forged in battle. Nevertheless, Paul says

²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. (Acts 20:25 ESV)

When I leave this beach and get on that boat, I won't be back. A hand grenade couldn't have concussed them more.

²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. (Acts 20:26-27)

Paul is handing off the spiritual responsibility for the church in Ephesus to its elders. "Here! Take it! I've run my laps. Now run!" The handoff is high stakes. Like a vigilant watchman handing the keys to the next watchman on shift, he's discharging himself of all responsibility before God for the souls of those he diligently taught.

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. (Acts 20:28, ESV)

The stakes couldn't be higher. I'm handing you responsibility for the people God purchased for His own. That's us, Church. Prized by God.

Psalm 49 says, "No man can redeem the life of another, or give to God a ransom for him. The ransom for a life is costly no [human] payment is ever enough."

Yet, God purchased at the supreme cost of the lifeblood of His Eternal Son, His only Son, the Son HE loves. Nothing in the universe is more precious to God! And God Himself, by His Spirit, puts His blood-bought bride into the care of overseers ... of men who feed us, lead us and stay vigilant for us.

Threats will come. Of all kinds.

²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:29, ESV)

Even some of you right here on this beach will turn on God's sheep. You'll follow what tickles your fancy, you'll pervert the truth, put your own spin on it to entice the gullible to follow you.

It is the nature of sheep to stray.

It is the nature of wolves to devour the stray.

Elders, guard your own hearts and guard God's flock. From drift. From distraction. From deceit. From derailment. From the culture's koolaid. Truth that gets twisted is toxic. It maims. It kills. Stay vigilant.

The thief comes only to steal, to kill and to destroy. I have come, our Good Shepherd said, that they might have life and have it to the full. (John 10) Under-shepherds are charged with protecting HIS flock.

³¹ **Therefore be alert**, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. (Acts 20:31)

If your elders ever come to you in the gentleness and humility of Jesus, maybe even with earnest tears, pleading with you to take notice and make a course correction—take heed. They are guarding your soul.

They want you to finish well. We're all called to

1) Proclaim the whole counsel of God. 2) As one serving the One High King. 3) Being vigilant for any and all threats. And finally ...

4. Resourced in God and His Word. (v. 32, 36-38)

When Paul said, "I'll soon be on that boat and you'll never see my face again," their hearts sank. "What are you talking about? You're our mentor. You're our brother battling beside us! We need you here!"

Paul points them instead to what they need most:

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. (Acts 20:32, ESV)

It's God you need most. It's God's word that does God's work in you to fortify you to the finish where you will receive the prize—the eternal reward God in store for those he's making holy.

Every leader will one day leave. Even the apostle Paul sailed into the sunset.

When Moses died, he left a massive gap. But God's told Joshua at the baton pass: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Don't be frightened, and don't be dismayed, for **the LORD your God is with you** wherever you go." (Josh 1:9) God gave Himself to Joshua.

God gave Joshua more. "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth ... meditate on it ... be careful to do it ... then you will make your way prosperous ... then you will have good success. (Josh 1:8) God gave Joshua His Word.

The best thing any outgoing leader can do is commend God's people to God and to the word of God's grace. Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Paul's talk on the beach was done. It went quiet. His ship was ready to sail.

³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship. (Acts 20:36-38, ESV)

As I look at our congregation, God's precious flock, it occurs to me ...

We MUST pray for our elders, our pastors, our leaders. They bear a heavy weight for our spiritual care. It's a high and holy calling. The challenges they face exceed mere men. Let's keep commending them to God and to the Word of His grace.

And pray for God to raise up more mighty men of God. Pray for the B2 training course our pastor will teach this fall and winter. Pray for men to be trained to take the baton and lead faithfully, fruitfully to the finish line.

And remember, none of us knows when our race will be done. In ten years? Twenty? It could be tomorrow. This summer, our seniors gathered at Homewood Park and had a great time. I had a good conversation with Barry Cockburn. The next day Barry was Home. His race was run.

Whether you're an elder over God's flock, or a member of God's flock:

Run NOW so as to finish well:

Proclaim the whole counsel of God,

as one serving the One High King,

being vigilant for any and all threats,

resourced in God and His Word.