

## Study 8 20/3/14

# Christ's Love among Enemies

Acts 20:17-35

### The setting

Paul has completed his third missionary journey, spending three years in Ephesus (19:10; 20:31) and revisiting churches established on previous trips. These revisits are passed over quickly but involve three months in Greece (20:2-3). Twice in this journey, he needs to leave a city because of a riot! Now, he is intent on returning to Jerusalem (19:21) but speaks long at Troas, and then, travels down the Aegean coast by boat and arrives at Miletus, effectively a port city for Ephesus. Because of time constraints, he asks the elders to meet him here.

### The speech

Paul speaks as a pastor to other pastors. This is the only time in *Acts* that we hear how Paul speaks to believers but the difference is only in style. (The only other apostolic addresses to Christians are Peter's and James' at the Jerusalem Conference.) He bears his heart and takes us to the centre of what the church is to be about. What he says is filled out in his letters.

Paul speaks earnestly about his own ministry. This, he thinks will be his last visit to them (v. 25; cf. 2 Tim. 4:20) and he needs to be heard. He is emphatic that he has behaved blamelessly and cannot be blamed for anything that subsequently happens here (vv. 18-21, 26-27, 31). He doesn't need their approval but Jewish opponents have, and will increasingly, oppose the gospel, and Paul, its messenger will be the one they try to discredit. These accusations are baseless, and the implication is that his opponents are actually opponents of Christ himself.

The real cause of Paul's earnestness however is the price God paid to create his church. He bought it with 'his own blood', clearly the blood of Christ, but the body and blood God gave him (Heb. 10:5-10) and the calling to lay down his life (John 10:18; 14:31). God so loved... that he gave his only begotten Son (John 3:16). God commends his love to us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). None of us can get behind this but should pray that we may comprehend it by the Spirit (Eph. 3:16-19). It is the centre of all that the church is called to do, it provides the meaning for the creation and is the heartbeat of its future.

Paul says his own life is not valuable to him. Against the *solemn testimony* that he will suffer in Jerusalem he asserts that his life is not important to him if he may give *solemn testimony* to the grace of God. C. T. Studd captured the meaning of this when he asserted, 'If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.' Clearly, this intensity is not a mere militant crusading, but an eagerness of affection and understanding (e.g. Phil. 1:9; Col. 1:9-11) and the action that arises from this. He is not battle hardened or reacting to his enemies. He wants them to know the love of God.

Paul uses various phrases to describe the content of apostolic ministry. He proclaims and teaches 'repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ' (v. 21), 'the gospel of the grace of God' (v. 24), 'the kingdom' (v. 25), 'the whole purpose of God' (v. 27) and 'the word of his grace' (v. 32). He refers, not to different aspects of his work but to various descriptions of all that he teaches. He moves seamlessly from beginning doctrines of repentance (cf. Heb. 6:1) to the beloved doctrine of grace (Eph. 1:6; 2:7), to the comprehensive work of God's reign (cf. Acts 1:3; Luke 24:44-49) and all this arising from God's eternal counsel (cf. Eph. 1:3-14).

He does all this publicly and privately and makes it stick by saying ‘anything that was profitable’ (v. 20), that is, whatever will bring the whole of God to the whole of man and the whole of man to the whole of God. Only the authoritative announcement of God’s grace can create and sustain the church; only repentance and faith can participate in this grace; God’s reign is established by the word of his grace; and we need to know all God is about and know that it is his eternal counsel. It is from this rich storehouse that the Church’s teachers must bring what is needful, whether to believers or unbelievers.

Paul summons the Ephesian elders because they can verify what he has said about himself to opponents, and because they must shepherd the church of God. The Holy Spirit has made them overseers. (In passing, we note that ‘elders’, those who shepherd or pastor and ‘overseers’ or ‘bishops’ describe the same group of people.) They must guard themselves by ensuring that they are always filled with the love of Christ and walk humbly before God. They must guard the church by doing the same things that Paul has done, especially by guarding the gospel (2 Tim. 1:13-14). If the apostles and prophets are the foundation of the church, with Christ as cornerstone (Eph. 2:20), the church can only be built and sustained by bringing the truth the apostles taught to the whole Church and to all those whom the Lord is calling to himself. In various ways, all Paul’s letters are written to guard the gospel because if the gospel is diminished, perverted or ignored, there is nothing left with which to guard the church.

Our gentle age may think of pastoring as a rather toothless task, and hopefully, it remains toothless as regards personal advantage. But the gospel is not toothless and Christ is not toothless! The ‘pastor’ word is used of Christ in *Revelation* in very strong terms (Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15) to signify that the Lamb of God reigns and that the opposition of the nations is fruitless. The nations are not going to be affected by those who capitulate to the world’s love of softness, or, on the other hand, to the world’s drift into arrogance. The church and its leaders must heed one Shepherd, and live only by the strength of God’s grace (2 Tim. 2:1).

The practical goodness of the church and its leaders is revealed in the way Paul labours hard so as not to be misunderstood by his hearers, or be a burden to his converts. Charlatans were prevalent in the first century and Paul has worked hard to avoid being confused with them. He is sympathetic with human weakness, as seen in his dealing with cultural issues in Corinth and Rome (1 Cor. 8:13; Rom. 15:1). He is mindful of his Saviour who taught us all to be givers rather than receivers.

Finally, Paul shows the confidence we may all have in Christian ministry. He commits these elders to God and the word of his grace (v. 32). This is doing what God has done in entrusting us to his gospel (Rom. 6:17). We are not left merely with the uncertainties of human frailty but are entrusted to what God can do. This word of grace, by the power of the Spirit, is able (*dunamai*) or potent to effect what it promises. We may not have grounds to be confident in people, but we must be confident in God *for* people. The gospel is able to deliver us to the new heaven and earth—our inheritance (1 Pet. 1:4; 2 Pet. 3:13), sanctified by the gospel (26:18; Rom. 15:16; 2 Thes. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2), and so, eligible for this privilege.

These elders kneel with Paul to pray. Here is where the church is truly potent because it humbly seeks for God to do what he alone can do, and what he loves to do.

## Sequel

Paul, in fact, moves from here to Jerusalem, reminded often that troubles await him in there. He is intent on going, and compelled by the Spirit to be there for Pentecost (v. 16, 22). In fact, the troubles he says the Ephesian elders will face, do occur. Paul writes to Timothy, who stays in Ephesus, to look out for opponents (1 Tim. 1:3). Later, when Christ himself speaks to the Ephesian church, he says they have abandoned the love they had at first (Rev. 2:4). Clearly, the object of this speech, and the purpose of all Christian ministry, is to ignite and fan the flame of love for Christ.