

Sermon 63, Paul Exits, but the Kingdom Continues, Acts 20:13-38

Proposition: Paul is going away, but the Kingdom of God is continuing onward.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this the only speech in Acts that’s delivered to those who are already Christians. The others are sermons preached to non-Christian audiences, if you can believe it. Surely that tells us something about how receptive first-century audiences were compared to audiences in the contemporary West! But though there is much to lament about our culture these days, the reason we’re here is not to lament the decline of the West. We are here to hear from the living God, who is not in decline. Today we are going to look at Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders as a whole; over the next three weeks, we will proceed to look at each part of it in detail. What the speech as a whole says is that though Paul is leaving the stage, the Kingdom of God is not leaving the stage. Paul is steadily moving toward Jerusalem; like his Savior, he has to go and confront the cross there. But though he is going to die, not necessarily in Jerusalem but definitely at some point, and likely soon, his speech, and the frame in which Luke has put it, make it abundantly clear that God’s will is not going away, and His plan is not going to be frustrated. The Kingdom is still coming, even though Paul is going.

I. Travel: The Kingdom Is Still Making Progress, vv. 13-16

Our text begins with a blizzard of travel notices, as the group goes from Troas down the coast of Asia Minor toward the open Mediterranean and the coast of Syria. As was common in those days, the ship does not simply leave port and steam straight to its destination. Rather, they sail during the day and put into port, or at least drop anchor, at night. That seems like an unbelievably slow way to travel compared to how we do it today, but one mustn’t forget that it is more parallel to a road trip today than to a sea voyage today. When you’re driving a car, you generally stop for meals and stop for the night. Certainly in those days, it was very difficult to be sure of exactly

where you were at night. In a place like the Aegean, where islands litter the sea the way that flowers litter a garden bed, the chance of running into something in the night was too great. Better to drop anchor at Mitylene, and then Chios, and then Samos, and so on, as Luke describes it.

But of course, that is what he describes. Why does he describe it? What is his point?

A. The “We” Passages: Luke Was Here

The first reason is simply to remind us that he is an eyewitness. Luke was here. He was on the boat. He talked to Paul. He knew Gaius and the rest of the seven traveling companions.

B. Detailed Travel Diaries Make the Kingdom’s Progress More Believable, vv. 13-15

More specifically, one reason he includes these travel diaries is that the details make the Kingdom’s progress more believable. After all, think about it. We have posited over and over that Luke’s purpose is to teach the certainty of the Kingdom. What has been taught to Theophilus regarding the truth and coming of Jesus is real and certain. The whole book of Luke-Acts is thrusting toward the goal of showing the certainty of the Kingdom’s coming in Jesus and its progress through the work of the apostles.

Most of the book is not detailed travel notices. But a few verses are, here and there—because Luke wants us to know that the reign of Christ, driving back the forces of darkness, came through the work of ordinary men like Aquila and Timothy and Luke himself who had the good fortune to know Paul and work alongside him.

But by far the larger and more important thing in this chapter is not travel notices, but Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders.

II. Farewell Address: Paul’s Exit Is Not the End of God’s Kingdom

In this speech, Paul describes his ministry and hands the baton to the elders. The message is clear: Ministry doesn’t end just because Paul is leaving. The kingdom continues, now under the supervision of the elders instead of the apostles. Their ministry needs to be like Paul’s — and ultimately, the whole project is God’s business.

A. Paul Worked Hard at Evangelism and Discipleship, vv. 18-27

We are going to look at this whole passage in detail next week, as I’ve mentioned. But I want to summarize the first part of it with the simple statement that Paul worked his tail off. Paul reminds the elders that they know how he acted. He’s not telling them anything new; he is reminding them of something. He taught in public and from house to house. He covered the subject of God’s plan of salvation so thoroughly, with so many people, that he is able to say that there is nothing more he could have done. No one from Ephesus or its surrounding area would go to Hell because Paul was silent at the wrong time, or because Paul failed to make his teaching clear.

Brothers and sisters, Paul’s ministry was not a proud one. He was motivated by humility. His life was threatened on numerous occasions during this ministry; indeed, 1 Corinthians seems to suggest that he even ended up in the arena as a gladiator to fight wild beasts on one occasion. That was because he would not shut up. Believing in Jesus rarely gets Christians martyred; it’s

talking about Him that does that. Paul doesn't say "I believed in Jesus for years among you." He says that he talked about Jesus. He declared everything that they needed to know or could possibly use in their Christian walk.

That, of course, is how the kingdom grew under his ministry. He consistently rescued men and women from Satan's dominion and saw them converted into servants of Christ. That was Paul's life work, and he pursued it diligently during his years in Ephesus.

B. Paul Handed the Baton to the Elders, vv. 28-31

But though Paul was an incredibly effective minister in the Kingdom, he pivots now to say "I'm moving on, but ministry doesn't stop. Elders, you're on deck." Notice how smoothly he does that. He talks about his own example for ten verses, describing all the things he did and how his conscience is clear that he could not have worked any harder than he did. Then he hits them with an imperative: "Be on guard over yourselves and the flock." He's not just inviting them to admire his ministry, in other words. He's inviting them to replicate it.

Elders, do you hear that charge? Do you feel its gravity? Are you ready to serve with humility and tears, in the midst of plots against your life? Are you ready to declare the whole counsel of God, publicly and from house to house? Above all, are you ready to protect the flock against fierce wolves at the hazard of your own reputation and even perhaps life?

Paul brackets the four verses addressed to the elders with one command: Be on guard. Elders, we are going to be tempted to relax our vigilance. We are going to be tempted to think "The church is humming along just fine. The wolves have been eradicated. There is no threat to our congregation." Paul begs to differ. He insists that the Kingdom is still coming, is still rescuing people from the darkness, but that now instead of the apostles it's the elders who make sure that ministry happens and protect the flock by killing wolves.

C. Paul Handed the Congregation over to the Lord, v. 32

Not only does Paul pass the baton to the elders; he hands the congregation over to God. Obviously, he is speaking directly to the elders, but when he says "I commend you to God" it's silly to think that he commended the elders to God but did not commend the congregation they represented to God as well.

What does it mean to commend someone to God? The word in Greek means "to place before" or "set in front of." Paul took this church in Ephesus, his baby, his little children over whom he labored night and day, and laid it at the feet of God and the word of God's grace. Paul knew that he, mighty apostle though he was, was not the final arbiter of progress, not the final agent of the coming of the Kingdom. Rather, he was an undershepherd, hired for a lifetime but not for an eternity. As I said a few weeks ago, it was at Ephesus that he showed that he knew how to take a break. Remember? When he first came, the Jews said "Tell us more" and he said "No, gotta run."

Paul knew how to take a break and how to commit his future to God. He knew how to take a break because he knew how to commit his future to God. And he also knew how to commit his congregations' futures to God. That is so clear here. He knew the threats, the fierce wolves — and he walked away, saying "God has called me elsewhere, but I place you in his

care.” Parents, we have to do this with our children when they grow up. Church members, we sometimes have to do this when God calls us to a new location. You may have good reason to think that you are indispensable in this church; I may have good reason to think it about myself. Yet God can and does call church members and pastors to move on. Paul lived for at least several years, probably at least a decade, after leaving Ephesus. But his ministry there was done; God had other plans for him.

Do you know how to commit someone, even a whole church, to God and stop worrying about it? It may not be easy. But it is definitely essential.

D. Paul Worked Hard at Generosity, vv. 33-35

Having passed the baton to the elders and handed the congregation over to God, Paul returns to the theme that we have seen many times across Luke’s work — the theme of power over money. Paul testifies that he exercised power over money, thus showing himself to be qualified to exercise spiritual power. (Conversely, as you remember, those who are overpowered by money, like Ananias and Sapphira, are not capable of exercising spiritual power.) Why does Paul return to the theme of his own example? Because he’s saying to the elders, “You are now the ministry leaders here. God help you if you start coming under the dominion of money.”

In other words, as he passes the baton, Paul says what? “Only those who have control of money are eligible to lead the church of God. Only those who work hard and give generously are worthy of following in my footsteps.”

E. Paul’s Entire Ministry Was Driven by Jesus’ Example, v. 35

He winds it up with the most important point of all: His entire ministry was driven by Jesus’ example. Paul didn’t teach everyone just because it was right; he did it because Jesus did that. Paul didn’t live for money because Jesus didn’t live for money. Paul practiced altruism because the Lord is right: It is more blessed to give than to receive.

That, in a nutshell, is what the church is about. The church is about giving because we serve a Lord who’s about giving. Now, it’s easy to see how the unscrupulous can abuse that. They naturally think that if Christians are going to be about giving, others should be about taking. That’s wrong, that’s evil, and God hates that.

Paul knew that people would try to abuse his generosity. That didn’t stop him from being generous. Jesus knew that people would try to abuse his generosity. That didn’t stop him either. And it shouldn’t stop us.

III. Kingdom Citizens in Action, vv. 36-38

Well, even as Luke shows us that the kingdom is progressing as the church is committed to God and the capable hands of the elders, he also shows us a vignette of kingdom life. When you serve God, what characterizes your life? He highlights two major things.

A. Prayer, v. 36

The first is prayer. Paul spoke, encouraging them — and then he prayed. The final word was a word addressed to God, presumably asking Him to help the Ephesian church, to bless Paul’s trip, and, surely, asking that His Kingdom would come and His will be done in Ephesus as it is in Heaven.

Our lives as subjects of God's rule should be characterized by prayer. He is in charge of everything that happens to us, and so we ought to submit to Him and ask Him for help with all our needs. Are you prayer-ful? Do you seize every opportunity you can to talk to God, by yourself and with others? This is how the Kingdom makes progress, even without Paul around.

B. Love, vv. 37-38

The other thing that stands out here is the love that existed between Paul and the Ephesian elders. Worshiping together will do this to you. You get to love your church family like no one else on earth, and those bonds endure across the decades.

Some people think that Paul was just cold and logical. But it's clear that he was an emotional man, as he refers to tears over and over as part of his ministry. And the Ephesian elders were the same way. They started to cry, these grown men, when they saw that he was leaving. They cried especially because he had said he would never see them again.

Brothers and sisters, when you give yourself up to the rule of Jesus, when you submit to His Kingdom, you gain the ability to love like this. The bonds of love between you and others multiply and criss-cross every which way through your life when you are ruled by the King of Love, your shepherd.

Brothers and sisters, Paul exits, but the kingdom continues. Throughout this passage Luke has emphasized the continuity of the kingdom so that we can be certain about it. Now he reminds us too that faith and hope (represented by prayer) are great, but that the greatest of these is love, and that it abides right into eternity future.

IV. Travel: Back to the Ship, on to Jerusalem, vv. 16, 38, Luke 9:51

The final word is about travel. Paul goes back to the ship, accompanied by the Ephesian men who love him so dearly. He, like Jesus, is heading on to Jerusalem, toward chains and imprisonment. But though he is moving toward the exit, the kingdom is not going away. In fact, it is making progress through his exit, as his teaching to the elders about how to be elders has been a gold mine for the church ever since.

The Kingdom is coming, driving back the darkness and rescuing the people of God. Don't give up, faint, or be discouraged. Trust Him; serve Him; walk in love and prayer, in submission to your elders — and see Jesus' reign spread. Amen.