PAUL'S SHEPHERD LIFE

Acts 20:1-38  
Key Verse: 20:32

"Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

Last week, we studied Paul’s dynamic ministry in Ephesus. Sometimes, the message of the gospel seems to be the old, old story that we all know too well. But Paul emphasized to the disciples and new believers alike that faith in the gospel is faith in the power of God to defeat evil spirits and the power of sin. Those who want to keep an intellectual faith in Jesus as the Christ, but also keep their worldly attachments and sinful desires cannot experience the power of God. We must practice true repentance in Jesus’ name. When we repent in Jesus’ name, we open the door of our heart so that the Holy Spirit may come in and drive out all the evil spirits that torment our mind and soul. Those who practice true repentance can experience true freedom from fear, and also God’s help to make their lives fruitful and a source of blessing. We pray that each of us may practice true repentance in Jesus’ name, like Paul, so that God’s world salvation purpose may be fulfilled even through us. In today’s passage, we want to study Paul’s preparation to return to Jerusalem. Paul had labored intensively in order to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to demonstrate the power of the gospel of God’s grace to Jews and Gentiles alike. Now, as he prepared to leave, Paul wanted to share with the disciples one final word of encouragement and exhortation. Mostly, Paul teaches us what it means to be a shepherd. May God help us to learn the heart of St. Paul and of our Lord Jesus to shepherd even one other person with tears.

I. Paul’s mission life (1-17)

First, Paul’s shepherd life (1-7). When Paul preached the kingdom of God and unleashed the power of the Holy Spirit, many wicked and
sinful people were convicted of their ungodly lives. They repented of worshiping idols and living immoral lives. They denounced their former way of life, and made a clear decision to live by faith in the Lord Jesus. On the other hand, many worldly people were threatened by Paul’s powerful ministry, and most of all, by the gospel message that we should serve God first, others second, and serve ourselves last. They started a riot in Ephesus, and nearly succeeded in stamping out what Paul had labored for over the past three years. But God was watching over the disciples, and used a city clerk to quiet the crowd and diffuse the situation.

When the situation was brought under control, Paul called all the disciples together, and encouraged them. The King James version says that he embraced them. Paul loved the disciples at Ephesus. But he was going to move on to visit the disciples in Macedonia and Achaia. Paul loved his sheep dearly, and wanted to enjoy each one of them his whole lifetime. But he was not building up a worldly community. He was laboring to build up the kingdom of God for the sake of his Lord and Master, King Jesus. Worldly people are most afraid of being lonely. So they cling to others in mutual despair. Many times, Paul experienced utter loneliness in doing the work of God. But Paul knew that Jesus’ death and resurrection had solved his loneliness problem forever in the kingdom of God. So he was free to serve others and love them, knowing that in the kingdom of God he would enjoy the glorious fellowship in Christ together with all the saints.

Paul traveled throughout Macedonia and Achaia, spending three months in what was probably Corinth. Every where he went, he spoke words of encouragement to the people. But the Jews were more and more jealous, and incensed at Paul’s preaching of the equality of all men before the gospel of God. They wanted to kill him as he sailed from Greece to Syria. When he learned of their threats, he decided to go back through Macedonia on his way to Jerusalem. Look at verse 4. “He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia.” When we look carefully at the hometowns of each of Paul’s
companions, we see that they were from every town where Paul had preached the gospel. Paul had worked hard not only to preach the gospel to everyone, but also to raise up disciples and leaders everywhere. Paul’s method of raising leaders was simple. He learned from Jesus’ discipleship ministry, and took them with him wherever he went, so that they might see his mission life. It meant that Paul had no privacy, and no opportunity to let it all hang out. But there was no other way to raise up disciples. Thank God for those shepherds and Bible teachers who sacrifice their personal privacy for the sake of raising up disciples of Jesus.

Second, Paul’s night and day ministry in Troas (8-13). Paul’s farewell journey took him from Macedonia to Troas, where he joined his companions and stayed for seven days. The night before he was to leave, Paul met together with the believers and broke bread with them. Then he began to speak with them. Because he was leaving the next day, Paul kept on talking until it was midnight. Several people may have been groaning because of his long announcements. Not only so, but one young man Eutychus, thought that he would make things easier for himself by sitting in the window, where he could breathe fresh air and let his mind wander. Suddenly, Eutychus fell into a deep sleep, and fell from the third story to his death on the ground. Everyone was shocked, but Paul ran down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. “Don't be alarmed,” he said, “he's alive.” Then he went back upstairs, broke bread and ate, and began talking again, this time, till daylight. The people went back home, greatly comforted that the young man was well again. Paul and his companions sailed on to Miletus, where he met with the Ephesian elders.

This seems to be just a funny story, but behind the humor, there is a clear warning to believers. We must not take lightly the encouragement and exhortations of the Bible and of our shepherds. Like the people of America before Sept. 11, 2001, the people of Troas may have taken for granted that they would always have St. Paul to exhort them, and that they would always have time to learn and to repent, later. They were sleepy Christians. But like Eutychus, sleepy
Christians are sure to fall. Out of his shepherd heart, Paul spoke to the people of Troas all night long, warning them to stay alert against the attacks of the devil. This warning seems especially meaningful to us at this time. May God help this nation not to fall back into spiritual slumber, but wake up to God's calling for America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. May God raise up 10,000 Bible teachers in this generation, and send out 1 million missionaries in this century from America.

II. Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders (20:18-38)

First, Paul served the Lord with great humility and with tears. When Paul met with the Ephesian elders, he began to share with them the testimony about his shepherd life. Look at verse 19. "I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews." Paul served the Lord among the Ephesians with great humility, just as Jesus had served the flock of God. In order to serve sinners Jesus renounced the glory and power of the kingdom of heaven and emptied himself and made himself nobody. The greatness of Jesus is based on his humbleness. In his humbleness he became a friend of tax collectors. He became eyes to the blind. Jesus humbled himself like a man of many iniquities so that he might take up all our infirmities and transgressions. Jesus humbled himself to obey God's will to die on the cross like a criminal. Here we learn that Paul is great because he learned Jesus' humbleness. He was the world's greatest evangelist. But he looked on himself before God as one who had been abnormally born. He cried because he could not be as humble as Jesus in serving his sheep. One young man wanted to be a great servant of God like Paul. So he asked a guest speaker who had 2,000 members in his church, "What is the first secret of a successful ministry?" "Humbleness," answered he. "What is the second secret?" he asked. "Humbleness," answered he. "What is the third?" he asked in desperation. "Humbleness," answered he. This young man wanted to be proud and at the same time be a great servant of God. So he despaired at the answer. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). Humble people not only win many converts, but also they inherit the earth.
Second, Paul taught them to turn to God in repentance and have faith in Jesus. Look at verse 21. "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus." Paul helped people to acknowledge God who is Almighty and who is holy, holy, holy. The people of Paul's time lived without God. They were godless and merciless. Paul taught them to turn to God in repentance. Repentance exactly means turning to God. Those who live as slaves of money must turn to God and live for the glory of God. There are many who say, "I'm okay; I don't have to repent." But Romans 3:10 says, "There is no one righteous, not even one." Paul also taught people to have faith in Jesus. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6). Let's remember, "turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."

Third, Paul's attitude toward God's high calling (22-24). Look at verses 22-24. "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." Compelled by the Spirit, Paul determined to visit Jerusalem before going to Rome. On his third journey, while in Ephesus, Paul realized that God was leading him to Rome. Rome was the center of the Gentile world. Paul saw God's vision to spread the gospel to the whole world through Roman roads. So he said in 19:21b, "After I have been there (to Jerusalem), I must visit Rome also."

Why did Paul want to visit Jerusalem? At that time Paul had one great purpose. The Jerusalem church was materially very poor. So Paul aimed to take offerings from all his Gentile churches as a contribution to the church at Jerusalem (Ro 15:25,26). Paul was compelled to carry out this plan for two reasons. First, he wanted to emphasize the unity of the church; he wanted to see the Gentiles belong to the body of Christ, together with the Jerusalem church. This
means that he needed to enlighten the Jews to God's high calling of them to be "a light for the Gentiles." Paul wanted the Jerusalem church, by the help of the Holy Spirit, to recognize that the offering from the Gentile churches was the work of God. Paul had a broken spirit because of his own people's obstinacy. Secondly, he wanted the Gentile believers to learn a giving spirit. The Jews had struggled for centuries to hold on to God's word and promise of a Messiah in the face of the devil's constant tempting. But, by God's grace, it was to the Gentile believers that the promise was given, when the Jews rejected Jesus. The Gentile Christians should not take this blessing for granted. So Paul encouraged them to make an offering to the Jerusalem church. For Christians, acts of love are more important than just talking. Paul showed his acts of love in order to move the hearts of the Jerusalem church members. To complete his mission, Paul gave his life.

Fourth, "Be shepherds" (28-31). Paul had many things to say as his final words. But he did not say, "Be nice;" he said to the Ephesian elders, "Be shepherds." Of course Paul knew that shepherd life was not easy. But he encouraged them to be shepherds because Jesus was a good shepherd who laid down his life for sinners. Read verse 28. "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." Paul knew that after he was gone, savage wolves would come in among them and not spare the flock. Paul gave the Ephesian elders an example of how to be shepherds over the flock of God. Look at verse 31. "Keep on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears." Shepherding is different from being an office clerk. A shepherd must keep his flock day and night, not for one or two days, but for at least three years.

Fifth, "Live by the grace of God" (32). Look at verse 32. "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." In short, Paul committed the elders to God's grace. What could Paul say to them when he would not see them again? Paul committed them to God's
grace through his Son Jesus. God's grace is that he did not punish us because of our sins; instead he gave his Son to save us from our sins (Jn 3:16). God's grace is God's sacrificial love. God's grace is God's forgiving love. There are two kinds of people. One kind lives by emotional feeling. This kind of people tear themselves and others apart with their conflicting emotions (Ro 8:6). The other kind lives standing on God's grace. Paul encouraged the elders to live by God's grace so that they might build themselves up in God's grace. Paul prayed that they might live by God's grace and inherit the kingdom of God. When we remain in God's grace, we lose many bananas. But we can have the peace of God. Also, we can forgive others, remembering God's immeasurable grace. Finally, we can inherit the kingdom of God. In his greetings to Christian brethren Paul always used the word "grace." "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (1 Ti 1:2b). 2 Timothy 2:1 says, "You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." We must help our sheep to build themselves up in God's grace.

Sixth, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (33-38). Paul was not a salary man; he supported himself as a tentmaker, even though he worked harder than anyone else. Read verses 33-35. Paul supported himself because he remembered Jesus' words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Let's see how they loved each other through this farewell scene. Look at verses 36-38. "When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship."

In this passage we learn that we must preach the good news of the kingdom of God. Also we deeply realize that we must be shepherds of our sheep like Paul. Above all, we must build ourselves up in God's grace and inherit the kingdom of God.