

The Responsibility of Church Leaders
Acts 20:28-31

We've been studying the book of Acts for, oh my, nine years? I don't know, something like that, a long time now. You just haven't seen me for a little bit. I've been over in the adult Sunday school class teaching on ministering to Catholics, but, hey, I get to be back with you again and pick up where we've been in the book of Acts which is in Acts chapter 20. The book of Acts is the story of the early church, how it started, what happened to move the church from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and then the greatest remotest parts of the world. And so, the gospel has come from a very localized area to now the civilized world. And this larger section, we've been in, Acts 18:23 through 21:16, records the third missionary journey. The first missionary journey covered the initial ministry to what is modern-day Turkey, Asia Minor. Then the second missionary journey went across the Aegean Sea to Greece, founded churches there. And now in the third missionary journey, Paul is returning to the churches that he established in Greece and in Asia Minor, and the particular focal point of this is Ephesus.

The third missionary journey has much to do about Ephesus. So, he spent quite some time, we saw at chapter 19, in Ephesus - then he went to Greece. Now he's coming back; rather than stop at Ephesus, he stops (the ship actually stops) at a nearby place called Miletus. So, this ministry is to the Ephesians, the Ephesian leaders at Ephesus, but they have traveled to Miletus about a day's journey away, and he is going to be speaking with these leaders of the church that responded five years earlier in Ephesus in this town called Miletus. So, there's that. Okay? So, that kind of orients us where we are. He's on his way to Jerusalem. He's completing the missionary journey, but he's spent so much time and effort there that he called for these leaders to come and to be ministered to one last time.

If you're keeping track, the one speech in this whole book that we can discern that Luke (the author of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts) actually heard for himself, rather than getting it from other sources, was this one right here - this farewell if you will to the people of Ephesus, the leaders of Ephesus. So, Luke was here, and here's the record of what Paul said when he called these elders, and had them come to him. And I'm going to start in 20:18. You can read along with me, and we'll go down through - we're not

going to read the whole thing because I'm only going to look at verses 28-31 today. So, we'll read down through verse 31 and see where we are here. So, beginning in verse 18, Paul says to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears."

So, that's our section that we're looking at, and we're going to focus today beginning in Acts 20:28 and Paul's ministry. How do you go about deciding what a church should be doing? How do you discern what church to attend? And I looked up a survey done by the Pure Research Center. They just asked people, why did you choose to attend the church you're attending? And they gave an answer. Most people said quality of sermons. That puts a lot of pressure here, doesn't it? Better be decent or we're going to have people disappear or feeling unwelcomed by the church leaders. So, I'd better welcome you, make you happy that you're here, and I want to do that, but a list of other things; style of service, you know what the flavor is that you come for; location, how close you are; education for kids; coming for kids. Those are the top five. I would say none of these are really the focus of what we just read here. What is it that Paul is exhorting these leaders of the

church of Ephesus to do? What is their priority? And we're going to look at what their priority is, and it may not be what the same priority of people when they go to seek out a church is. Now sermons are a part of it, but there's something even more fundamental than that because you can have people giving nice sermons that people enjoy - you can have good children's ministry - you can have a welcoming, friendly church, especially the leaders who are just friendly as can be - and you can miss the mark by miles.

In verse 28, we'll start with even preparing to do this task, and this is the preparing for this defense of the church. And first and foremost, we start with these words, verse 28, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock..." So, that's kind of our calling here to "Be on guard ... for all the flock..." First off is ourselves, we cannot defend the church, we cannot protect the church without defending and protecting ourselves, meaning the leaders. If you have unqualified leaders, either they don't know the Scripture or they have their immorality. They're not following the servant King. They're serving themselves. Then what do you end up with? Well, unqualified leaders poison a church. So, if you do not have people who are qualified to lead, then you should not be going to that church. And the reason you should not be going to that church is because, as the church leadership goes, so goes the church. You can have lots of fun things. You can have lots of things for kids and for people to feel welcome with, but if you have people who are leading the church that are not on guard for themselves, that are not truly seeking to follow the Lord... I don't mean they're perfect, I just mean they have to have first things first, and that means the Lord is the first in their lives, and they meet the qualifications of Titus, chapter 1 and 1 Timothy, chapter 3. Then you have a church that has the capability and the possibility of serving the Lord, but if you don't, then you don't. So, being welcoming is maybe a part of that because we want to be hospitable. We want to be welcoming. We want to love people, but there's more to it than that. There's righteousness. There's walking with God.

So, first off, Paul writes or Paul says and Luke writes, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock..." So, the rest of this is going to be dealing with "...and for all the flock..." part because that is our calling, our primary duty. Our primary duty as leaders of the church is to do what Paul told them to do. He could've done all kinds of things, said all kinds of things, focused on all kinds of things, but what did he charge them with? To "Be on guard

for yourselves and for all the flock....” and then he gave reasons why to “Be on guard ... for all the flock...” And first off, it’s because the Holy Spirit sovereignly established them as leaders of the church, as overseers of the church. These are called elders. This is how they were addressed back in the beginning of this section, verse 17; “From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.” So, we have a group of people, not just an individual person. This isn’t a task of one person. It’s a task of a group of people. They’re called elders, and they are charged with the responsibility to protect the flock, guard the flock, because the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. So, this was God’s thing. It doesn’t exactly describe how this has happened, but we can look and say, well, God must’ve been involved in this because He could’ve changed it if He so choose to.

So, since we have this position, we have responsibilities; “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers...” The overseer is to be among the flock in order to keep watch and be able to guard or care for the flock. They’re caretakers. They’re guardians. They’re protectors, and in order to do this... It’s impossible to do this from a distance, from a tower, removed from people. In this, as we go along, we’ll see more of this, but this isn’t a task that is to be done apart from the church. It’s a task to be done among the church with people, and hopefully, that’s what you see here, elders that are among the church, keeping watch as a caretaker or a guard. That’s kind of another way the word overseer was used in that day, as a guardian or someone who is overseeing, like a business of some sort or an endeavor.

The phrase “church of God” is a phrase actually only the apostle Paul uses in the New Testament - kind of been surprised at that. Paul has a fondness for the phrase “church of God,” and it communicates something. It communicates that the church belongs to God. His epistles refer to the “church of God,” and the church belongs to God. If the church belongs to God, it doesn’t belong to the church leaders. It doesn’t belong to a pastor. It doesn’t belong to any entity other than God Himself, and it belongs to Him because of this next phrase; “...to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” So, it belongs to God because “...He purchased it...” ... “...He acquired it...” is another translation. It’s His because of what He has done. When we are shepherding the church, it’s His church, and He has done the work in order to make it His. His! And the phrasing is interesting; “...to shepherd the church of God which He

purchased with His own blood.” And most translations have that - the vast majority of them, which kind of communicates that God “...purchased [it] with His own blood.” Which implies with this translation that this is Jesus as God “...purchased [it] with His own blood.” Because we know that Jesus’ blood is the means by which we have salvation.

There’s another way to translate this, the phrase “...which He purchased with His own blood” could be translated, “...with the blood of His own.” You might even have a footnote possibly in your Bible that translates it that way because this doesn’t make any sense in English, but in Greek, the word order is flexible. So, it could mean “...the blood of His own” implying His own Son, but clearly the death of Christ acquired and established the church for God, God the Father, working through God the Son to establish the church of God and the sacrificial work. Here’s the key, the sacrificial work of Jesus in purchasing and acquiring the church should motivate leaders to be sacrificial themselves to serve the church of God. This is clearly referring to Christ’s death. And the sacrificial work of God for the church drives the motivation for church leaders. If God loved the church so much and is so committed to building the church, and Jesus says Matthew 16:18; “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” Then, people that are responsible for the oversight of the church, how much more motivation do you need than this is God’s church which He sacrificed Himself for, to commit ourselves to? Not merely serve people, we’re serving the Lord’s people. This is God’s people, so we try to minister and help.

Even this morning, speaking here to you, I want you to be taught. I want you to learn. I want you to be served, but fundamentally, I want God’s people to be served. This is not about my care for you, just that this is because this is God’s thing. So, if it’s just between me and you, I might get a little tired of you. You might bother me. You might annoy me. How do you push through and still be faithful when things don’t always break the way you want them to break, or in the ministry that you have, in some class you’re going to be teaching, some Bible study you’re going to be doing? How do you keep persevering? It’s not just because you like the people so much, though hopefully you do, but it’s because this is the Lord’s people. This is God’s people, and we’re serving God, and we’re persevering, and we’re faithful because He purchased the church of God. So, this passage provides for us a perspective on the shepherding role of churches.

What is a church supposed to be doing? What is a church called to do? And here it is, the primary purpose, the primary duty of shepherding is protection. People will take this imagery of shepherding and they'll run with it, but fundamentally, if the sheep are being attacked, the sheep are being disruptive, how can you do anything when you have doctrinal issues, when you have unity issues, when you have people attacking the church? The primary duty in shepherding a church is protection, just like the primary duty of a shepherd is protection, and it doesn't take much in the Scripture to see this imagery come about. We have to protect the church of God. We need to guard the church of God, and why? The reason is because of the potential danger. There is a danger of the church, and this is verse 29; "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." So many people are leading churches and this message seems to be not that important. They might find more things important, like community involvement, ecumenisms, getting people together. And in the midst of getting their church bigger, doing things that get more people involved, some of those people are a threat to the church. So, in the attempt to try and get a bigger tent, we cannot be overlooking the danger that the church may be at risk for because savage wolves will come. Jesus said that.

Paul didn't start this idea. Jesus warned His disciples regarding "...false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." That's from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:15. This happens. This happens actually frequently, not maybe, sometime it may happen. It is going to happen, or Jesus wouldn't have mentioned it. He could've talked about something else then. He also, in John chapter 10, described people who ignore this. So, how does He describe people who ignore this? He described them as hired hands. Jesus taught those who ignore the wolves are not shepherds but are only hired hands. They may be doing things that the church wants them to do. They may be doing things that our society thinks a pastor ought to be doing. They may be a very busy guy, but if they're not protecting the flock and they disappear when the need comes, they're hired hands. And this process of pastors moving along to something better, to something bigger, to a bigger office or whatever, makes you wonder, what's the deal here? Are we just hired hands looking to do a job because we're the professionals, or are we trying to protect the church of God for which He sacrificed "...His own blood"?

And when you look at verse 29 and 30, there's two basic ways the church is at risk. Verse 29, the church is at risk from the outside. In verse 30, the church is at risk from the inside. Verse 29; "...after my departure savage wolves will come in among you..." And verse 30; "...and from among your own selves' men will arise, speaking perverse things..." And I can just speak from experience. My testimony is that's what happened in my lifetime. At Valley Bible Church, we've had people come from the outside, and we've had people from the inside, and both of those put the church at risk. We can tend to think the problem is more from the outside, and we can do classes on the cults, but some of the most challenging dangers are actually from the inside. And maybe that's what Jesus meant with (Matthew 7:15) "...come to you in sheep's clothing..." Some people are pretty easy to spot. They dress weird. They look weird, and they're talking about things; you don't know what they're talking about. But when they don't look weird, and they look like they know what they're doing, and they speak kind of the same language you speak, umm, that can get a little more challenging. So, we can see that what Paul warned about happened.

There's several places in Ephesus. Because he wrote to Timothy, he wrote the book of 1 Timothy and the book of 2 Timothy. He wrote the book of 1 Timothy five years later. So, right now, we're in the third missionary journey. This is like about the spring of 57 AD. So, in about five years, he would write to Timothy who was in Ephesus, and he mentions some of these things that have happened, and then he writes him again in 2 Timothy and it's about not quite ten years later, a little short of that, and the same thing. So, he's just not making this up and thinking, oh, this might happen. He says, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in..." And guess what? We find later writings that say that's what happened, and there's people - they even get pointed out. They even get identified by name - talk about politically incorrect. If I say look out for so and so, you might think, oh, now we're naming names here. Paul does that in the Scripture. So, if you see Hymenaeus, you see Philetus, kind of watch out for them.

Okay, so we can see these things really happened. So, there is an endless supply, an endless supply of twisted ways that people will advance doctrinal errors, that they'll be teaching bad things. There's so many ways to this. You cannot possibly take a course on this. You can't get a degree on this because new things keep coming up, maybe the old things repackaged, but you get

different twisting the Scripture in different ways. So, you have to study the Scripture. You have to know what the Word of God says so that when this happens, you can figure it out. You can't just go back to your school notes and see, what did they say twenty-eight years ago? You can't do that. You've got to be with the Scripture, with the people, because these things keep morphing and keep changing, but with all of that, they're all really the same. They all - when you boil them down, here's what you get. They all "...draw away the disciples after them." And that's verse 30; "...speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." People end up being led astray after these people that are the ravenous wolves, that are savage, that may even be among us and rise up and speak perverse things, all this. They "...draw away the disciples after them."

So, the primary characteristic of people who are a danger to the church is selfishness. It's people that are looking for their own interests, and they're looking to gain followers for themselves. They're making disciples of themselves not of Jesus, not to teach people to follow Jesus, but to follow them - how they do it, what their idea is of God, what they say rather than what Jesus said. So, when you have people who are busy about advancing what they say, I'd say, watch out. Be on guard. Hopefully, you're following Jesus, and people that are also following Jesus will be speaking the things that Jesus taught and the things that the disciples taught in Scripture. And when we stick with that, we're safe. When we follow the other things, we're not so safe. We become endangered. So, people looking to advance themselves, do so in opposition to God. God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. So, be warned "Be on guard..." because church leaders have the direct responsibility to protect the church of God, but this work involves the church too. Yes, we have the specific responsibility; we can't duck and cover. We can't subcontract it out. We can't take a sabbatical. We have to "Be on guard..." But, hey, help us out because some of this you may know about or you will know about whenever it happens, next year, next decade, I don't know, but when you encounter it, don't sit around going, gee, I wish somebody would do something about this. Engage! Because this work involves the church. We have the specific responsibility, the elders, and if the elders are derelict, you're in trouble. Find another church. But even if the elders are on the case, we can use all the help we can get because this is a big deal.

This is such a big deal that Paul, on his way to Jerusalem, took the time to stop and pause and get the elders from Ephesus to come and meet with him. And this is the core point of what he's saying; that's how important it is. And while we can think all other things are important, we can't miss this one because this will crack the whole foundation. These will be the termites that will destroy the whole structure of the building. We have to be faithful, so therefore since all of this is true, therefore be on the alert, and that's this diligence. Here's the command in verse 31, "Therefore be on the alert..." There's two commands here. There's "...be on the alert..." and there's "Be on guard..." Those are the two commands. Those things are what we have to do. So, while the church leaders will be challenged to shepherd the church of God, and we will be, there's no excuse for not being diligent. We might not be perfect at it, but we'd better try hard. If we're not diligent, if we're not "...on the alert..." and we're not "...on guard..." we're disobeying the Scripture. We have to do this. We have a commitment to do this. How well we do it, well, I'll grant you there's no perfect elder. There's no perfect group of elders. So, we may not be perfect at the job, but we can be faithful to the Lord and be on the alert.

And the reason is because that's what Paul did; "...remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears." He cared. He worked at it. He tried hard, so should we. He's an example that we must be diligent. So, as we should be diligent as leaders and as a fellowship, what happens? I've been here awhile now. I hope to be here awhile for the future if the Lord will give me the days, but I'm probably not going to be here forever. Right? If the Lord doesn't return, all of us are not going to be here, and then what's going to happen? It's one thing to say about this now, but what about tomorrow, and what about the next day? And what is Valley Bible going to be like in the years to come? Well, it's interesting because we can say the same thing about the church of Ephesus. What happened? What happened when Paul called these people, gave them the charge and encouraged them to "Be on guard..." and protect the church of God which He gave His own life "...purchased with His own blood" ... "...be on the alert..."

Well, let's read what happened, because in Revelation 2:1-7, we find out what happened. This was written almost forty years later. Almost forty years later, we will learn the outcome of the ministry of these Ephesian elders when Paul addressed them in about 57 AD. We get the book of Revelation

written in the nineties, and we get this, “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: ‘I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false...’ Whoo-hoo! Good job! They were faithful, and they did what Paul told them to do. But here you go; “...and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary, But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.’ ” So, we find that the church of Ephesus remained faithful to sound doctrine, and they resisted evil men, but they failed to remain zealous for the truth. We can be faithful to avoid the pitfalls that come from people who want to serve themselves and lead people astray, and we’d better be, because if we don’t have that, we’re not going to be commended for anything. Right? At least the Ephesians in Revelation 2 were commended for that, but that’s not enough. That’s not enough to say, well, we protected the church, and we spiked the football, and we say we’re done. That’s not enough; there’s the rest of this.

We can think right, and we can live wrong; or to put this another way, we can be doctrinally rich and ministry poor. So, the end of this is not just to protect the church for the sake of protecting the church. The end of this is to protect the church so the church can serve vibrantly in the world, that we can be a thriving, zealous church serving the Lord the servant King. We can’t do that with doctrinal issues, with disunity, with people leading people astray, and we can’t do that when our zeal, our love, grows dim. When we take all this for granted, we don’t have an enthusiasm for serving the Lord from the heart, eager to help people know Jesus. Doctrinal truth is not a replacement for true love of Jesus. We need both, so “Be on guard...” for the church with us as we do that. “Be on guard...” for yourselves as we do that. We need to protect ourselves from sin, from error, from confusion, and we need to protect the church, and we need to do that from the heart. We need to (Deuteronomy 6:5) “...love the LORD your God with all your heart and with

all your soul and with all your might” and do that together. May God grant us the grace to guard ourselves and our church.

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