**Paul’s farewell speech to Ephesians** Acts 20 v 13 – 38 Littlebourne 10.09.2023

Intro

Paul has travelled by land and sea and arrived back in the region of Ephesus. But he doesn’t want to go to Ephesus fearing that it would delay him, and he feels pressure from the Holy Spirit to get to Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. So, he sends for the elders of the church to come to him at the port of Miletus. He believes, rightly, that he will not see them again, so these words are full of poignancy and importance. They aren’t of course, his last words to them, because he later writes a letter to them – we can read it in our Bible, but at this moment in Miletus, he didn’t know he would live long enough to write such letters.

So, what can we learn from this important speech? I see four teaching points:

1. Paul’s character revealed

2. Paul’s attitude to life and death

3. Paul’s message

4. Paul’s admonition to the elders

1 Cor. 11 v 1 Paul writes: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ”

Are there people, who have influenced you by their godly lives? I have many, but some stand out: **Verna**, with his total dedication to the Lord, and love and knowledge of the scriptures; **Ruth’s** love of the Lord and her heart for intercession; **Paddy**, who led the worship time at church, by simply worshipping with all his heart.

Let’s pause for a minute and think of those whose godliness has impacted your life and give thanks for them.

Back to Paul.

**1. Paul’s character revealed** v. 19, 20, 33 – 36

Do you remember WYSIWYG? What you see is what you get. That was Paul.

In v 18, he says, “You know how I lived among you..” People see how we live and it is said that that speaks louder than our words. Certainly, if our lives and words don’t match up, people are very quick to spot it. Paul could say, “You know how I lived among you.” There was no mismatch; his life, testimony, preaching, and actions were consistent because his life was totally given to the Lord. He was an imitator of Christ and so he could say, ‘in any way that you see Christ in me, imitate that’. Paul was not one of the apostles who walked with the Lord during those three years of earthly ministry; he was not present at the crucifixion, he didn’t witness the resurrection and missed out on the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost.

But, as a young man, he heard Stephen’s preaching about Messiah Jesus and his testimony of seeing ‘the heavens opened and the Son of Man (i.e. Jesus) standing at the right hand of God”.

Paul was in the crowd that grabbed Stephen and rushed him outside of the city to stone him. The witnesses to this execution left their cloaks with Paul, so that they could more energetically throw rocks at Stephen to kill him.

Did this experience cause him to turn to Jesus, the Messiah? Absolutely not, it had the opposite effect. He approved of Stephen’s execution and became very zealous in hunting down Christians to kill them, until Jesus Himself met with him on the Damascus Road. You all know the story, I’m sure. Paul was undone, and transformed, and then developed over the years, by the Holy Spirit and, no doubt, through the input of other believers.

V19 He served the Lord ‘with all humility and tears’. Was it proud of him to say he served with humility?

Another influential person from my early walk with the Lord, Gerard Crispin, spoke of a ‘book he’d written’: My Humility and How I achieved It. And his wife’s companion book: His Humility and How I Stand It.

But, you know, when Paul says this, it isn’t a boast, is it? It’s just a statement of fact. He didn’t lord it over the early believers, he served them because he first served the Lord.

V34, 35 There is a biblical principle that those who have left everything to serve the Lord are worthy to be supported by other believers. In Luke 10, when Jesus sends out the twelve into the cities round about, he tells them to accept hospitality and to eat whatever they’re given. In 1 Timothy, Paul himself refers to support for ‘elders who labour in preaching and teaching’ quoting the OT scripture that a labourer is worthy of his hire.

However, Paul chose to work to support himself and his companions and encourages others to do likewise, in order to be able to give financial help where needed.

He wept, no doubt over those who rejected the message of salvation, and for those who struggled in their faith and for those who were persecuted. He was such a whole person – very intelligent and educated, single-minded in his dedication to the Lord, tough physically and mentally, but also unafraid of emotion.

He was bold and thorough in his teaching, v 20

V36, 37 The response of the Ephesian elders, tells us how much they loved and honoured him. They had lived with him over several years and knew him well. That they loved him and honoured him so much tells us a lot about his character.

Humble, weeping over wayward people, single-minded, totally given to the Father’s will; tough and tender with no fear of man. Is that like Christ? Can we imitate Paul as he imitated Christ? We can try.

**2. Paul’s attitude to life and death**

When Paul mentions trials in verse 19, he isn’t talking about the normal problems of life but about persecution *by his own kinsmen, the Jews.* Later, in his letter to the Corinthian church, he speaks of his trials: 2 Cor. 11 v 24 – 28.

“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one, (it was illegal to give forty lashes…). Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was ship-wrecked, I spent a night and a day on the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”

And, on top of all this, he was deeply and constantly concerned for all the churches and had what he called ‘a thorn in the flesh – a messenger of Satan to torment me’ which was not taken away, despite his prayers, but God’s word was ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’

This is the real context of the verse we sometimes quote: Phil.4v13

“I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.’

In Acts 16 there is the record of Paul and Silas beaten brutally beaten with rods and flung into prison, where they were shackled in the stocks. Imagine the pain, the fear, the indignity. What did Paul and Silas do? Feel sorry for themselves, resentful, angry with God? I’m pretty sure I would feel those things. Did they even question what God was doing? No, they prayed – OK, I would have done that – and sang praises to God. Not even praising through gritted teeth by a great exercise of will but *singing*!!!! Do you know how hard it is to sing when you’re upset or stressed? But they sang praises.

2 Cor. 4 v 6 – 11

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

“We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our mortal body.”

V16 – 18

“Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

“For *our light and momentary troubles* are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

He can speak of ‘these light afflictions’, *Light afflictions: being beaten nearly to death, more than once – Light afflictions???* And tell those being persecuted ‘to count it all joy to suffer for Christ’. Hebrews 12 v 2, 3 tells us to ‘Look to Jesus… who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross…consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.’

Whether Paul wrote Hebrews or another author, Paul certainly lived these words out – looking to Jesus, considering Him, so that he could say:

‘I honestly don’t know which is better – to be alive to serve you, or to die and be with the Lord. For me, to live is Christ, to die is gain.’

I mentioned earlier Prof. Verna Wright who was a great influence on me when I was a young believer. When, in later life, he learned he had cancer and only a short time left on earth he said, ‘When you see the finishing line, you run harder.’ Jesus set His face to cross the finishing line and triumph, so did Stephen, James, Peter and Paul. Let’s imitate them, as they imitated Christ.

**3. Paul’s message**

My gleanings from this passage are that Paul preached in synagogues, the public square and in private houses – wherever he could, basically, wherever there were people to listen.

He preached repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. John the Baptist preached ‘Repent’ and pointed people to Jesus (Matthew 3 v 2, 8; Mark 1 v 4, 7); Jesus, Himself, preached repentance (Mt.4 v 17; Mk 1 v 15) and that God’s kingdom is at hand. Paul preached repentance and proclaimed the kingdom.

I have witnessed what happens when there is an emphasis on “bringing people to faith” and missing out the need for repentance and the need to be born again. I really dislike the expression ‘come to faith/ bring to faith’ – faith in what? faith in whom? People need to be come to a place where they acknowledge their sin: (Romans 3 v23) All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; to recognise that the result of sin is spiritual death, but that the gift of God’s grace is forgiveness and life through the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ (Romans 6 v 23). They would no doubt need it explaining in simpler terms, but we need to bring people to repentance and new birth in a real encounter with the Living God. Anything less results in a speedy falling away and possibly an erroneous belief that they have been born-again, when they haven’t.

Paul, John the Baptist and Jesus preached repentance and the grace of God and proclaimed the Kingdom i.e. the rule of God in people’s lives and we should do no less and no other.

V20, 27 Paul kept back nothing that was helpful. It can be very tempting to miss out difficult bits of scripture. You are very blessed here to have teaching from Peter and Jonathan, and others, who will firmly grasp nettles. It is such a good idea to go through books of the Bible passage by passage, verse by verse, so that you have to tackle the more difficult bits! Let’s pray for all who have the opportunity to preach and teach to have the boldness in bringing the whole teaching for the profit of those who listen.

V. 26 The reference to being innocent of the blood of all, is from Ezekiel 33 v 1 – 7. The Lord appoints Ezekiel as a watchman for the house of Israel, to give warning when God anounces the penalty for wickedness, so that they will repent. God uses the illustration of the watchman on the city walls: If the watchman sees an attack coming and blows the shofar trumpet to give warning, but some people choose to ignore the trumpet and get killed or taken captive, it’s their own fault, the watchman is innocent of their blood. However, if the watchman sees an attack coming and fails to warn the people and they are ‘taken away in their iniquity’, the watchman is held responsible.

God says to Ezekiel, (I paraphrase) ‘I have made you a watchman for Israel. I will tell you what to say to warn then. If they refuse to listen, it’s their own responsibility, and you are not guilty: but if you fail to warn them and they die in their sins, their ‘blood I will require at your hand’.

This is a hard passage. Paul obviously took it very seriously and could say that he had been a faithful watchman warning people of the need to repent and turn to Jesus. What about me? What about you? We aren’t Paul or Ezekiel with their particular callings, but we do have the words of life and a commission from the Lord to make disciples and we have been given the Holy Spirit in us, to enable us.

**4. Paul’s admonition to the elders**

V 28 Pay careful attention to yourselves … It is so important that leaders pay attention to their own spiritual, emotional and physical *needs.* And watch their own walk and doctrine.

…and to all the flock. It struck me like someone handing on a very precious and fragile treasure, to protect and look after for the owner. And so it is. The church of God, for which Jesus died – purchased with His own blood.

As an elder of a local church, I was very challenged by these words. The call to Eldership is should not be a democratic decision, or an occasion for canvassing, like a political election, but a calling of the Holy Spirit which, in our denomination, is hopefully confirmed in the prayerful decision of the Church Meeting. For those of us called to this servant-role, there is a very precious and vulnerable treasure to look after and protect.

Paul warns that false teachers will come along and try to destroy the church and that people will also arise from within the fellowship who twist the truth and draw people away. They must be very alert to these dangers.

And so must we! Last Sunday, there was a programme about the terrible events in Waco, Texas, 20 years ago. A young man, calling himself David Koresh, after Biblical kings, infiltrated a seventh Day Adventist church in UK. He knew the scriptures and was a very good communicator. He drew people who were hungry for the word of God and vulnerable people. And for a long time, he seemed genuine – a man any church would welcome with open arms and encourage. But, he taught mostly from Revelation, called himself a prophet, moved his followers to Texas and gradually took over their money and their lives. Many of them were so in thrall to him, that they accepted his increasingly sinful behaviour and abuse; others couldn’t get away because he had their passports. It all ended in absolute tragedy.

**Exactly** what Paul warns about here: those who are from among the fellowship who arise and distort the truth and draw away disciples after them.

We must watch out for wolves in sheep’s clothing; know the scriptures and keep our spiritual antennae alert for Holy Spirit warnings.

Evidently, the elders in Ephesus heeded Paul’s warning because, in His letter to the Ephesian church in Revelation 2, the glorified Christ says, ‘I know your works, your patience and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not and have found them wanting. .. and … you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.’ However, the Lord tells them to quickly repent of having lost their first love of Him and return to the doing what they did at first.

**Conclusion**

We have looked at Paul’s character, his attitude to life and death and suffering for Christ, his message and his final admonition to the Elders of the Ephesian church. He said, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ”

I think we have seen Christ-likeness in Paul, don’t you?

Hebrews 6 v 10 - 12:

For God is not unjust to forget your labour of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but *imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises’*

And Hebrews 13 v 7

‘Remember those … who have spoken the word of God to you, *whose faith follow,* considering the outcome of their conduct.’

So, whatever God calls us to do, let’s imitate Paul’s faith, courage and patience and, whenever we have the opportunity, share the full gospel and pray for people to repent and turn to Christ.