

Sermon File # 919

Scripture Text: Acts 20:17-38

Sermon Title: *Preparing to Leave*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached

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Preparing to Leave

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Acts 20:17-38. Last Sunday we looked at Paul's ministry in Athens as an example of being Christian in a Christ-less culture. From Athens Paul journeyed to Corinth, the primary focus of his second missionary venture, where he ministered for 18 months. His third and final missionary venture begins in Acts 18. Paul invests most of his time, three years, in the city of Ephesus, Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). Here Paul once again encountered opposition from the pagans, yet was able to establish a strong congregation of believers. From Ephesus, Paul journeyed back through Macedonia and finished his collection for the Jerusalem Church. On his way back to Jerusalem, Paul came to Miletus, which was about 20 miles from Ephesus. Being in a hurry to reach Jerusalem before Pentecost, instead of his going to Ephesus, he sent for the elders of the Ephesian church to meet him in Miletus.

Paul's words to the elders from Ephesus are the most similar in all of Acts to his words in his letters, particularly the Pastoral Letters of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. These are also his warmest and most personal words in Acts. These are words of great encouragement from the Lord's servant who shows us how to prepare to leave our present assignment.

Follow as I read **Acts 20:17-38**.

Last Sunday you thoughtfully and graciously recognized our fifth anniversary with you as pastor and wife. Our elder chairman, Patrick Zaman, referred to the title of this sermon today and more than one of you have remarked that it looks like the title of a resignation announcement, "Preparing to Leave." Some of you may indeed be disappointed to learn that it's not. But it was in fact a "close call." It could well have been my departure notice, since we were in some suspense over a Belgium-USA treaty that requires expatriate Americans living in Belgium to leave the country for at least six months. Last Sunday, our anniversary Sunday, would have marked the day when normally we should have been out of Belgium. We have made application through the American and Belgian governments for a two-year extension onto our first tenure here. Then, should church be willing and circumstances allow, we will spend 6 months as a furlough or sabbatical, and then hopefully, return to IBC Brussels for at least another term of service.

In our series of sermons through Acts, I thought this was an important and timely text for me to assess my ministry at IBC. As I read Paul's reflections on his ministry in Ephesus I find important truths for me. However long the Lord allows me to serve here at IBC, I need to prepare to leave. I must aspire to be able to echo the things Paul said as he looked over his years in Ephesus.

We noted last Sunday how that, even though Paul made only a temporary stop in Athens, he made an eternal difference in people's lives because he lived as a pilgrim follower of Jesus and a faithful witness in a Christ-less culture (17:16-34). He left Athens a different place. And in our text today, we see even more vividly that in the city of Ephesus Paul made a difference. At the very beginning and throughout his three years in Ephesus Paul was preparing to leave. There were some important things that needed to happen for Paul to be able to leave successfully and he reviews these aspects with the elders, the servant leaders from the church in Ephesus. In his classical exposition of the pastoral ministry, the great English Puritan pastor in Kidderminster, Richard Baxter (1615-91), noted that these verses in our text should be written in capital letters on every pastor's study door (See page 229, reference below).

Although Paul is reviewing his ministry in Ephesus and gives a charge to the elders from Ephesus, what he says about the need to prepare to leave is not confined to those who hold the office of elder in the church. As one scholar notes, Paul was giving a challenge to those who performed a ministry function in the church and not necessarily to those who held a formal or official office (See Polhill, citation listed below, page 426).

We at IBC realize that we are all called to ministry, and although we have some who are serving in the role as elders, we are all involved in some type of oversight of others. Some of you have oversight of the spiritual direction and

formation of your children and all of these principles in our text apply to you. The day will come when you will have to leave your role as a parent to your child, when she or he leaves home as a young adult. And especially here at IBC, when so many of our members come and go with great frequency, and many after a short two or three year stay, we need to hear what Paul says to us about preparing to leave.

As we consider the example of Paul, we note that we prepare to leave this place first...

➤ **With a clear conscience**

In his message to the Ephesian elders, Paul gave a review of his ministry and could declare in verse 26 that he was “innocent of the blood of all men.” This is a reference, no doubt, to the words of the Prophet Ezekiel who as a watchman was accountable for the blood of those he might fail to warn of the pending judgment (Ezekiel 33:1-6). This was a way of Paul’s saying that he had a clear conscience before God, to whom he was ultimately accountable (In 1 Corinthians 4:1-5, Paul explains that his conscience is captive only to God, to whom he is accountable). Paul was always the brunt of a “smear campaign” conducted by his enemies and rivals who accused him of insincerity (See Stott, page 325, reference below). This review that Paul gave was a way of saying that as he looked back over his tenure in Ephesus he had a clear conscience before God and would thus be able to give a good accounting to him at the judgment...

- *Having proclaimed the message*

Paul says that he had fulfilled his calling to proclaim the message of Jesus, including anything that would be helpful to the people. Paul spoke the message of the good news of Jesus publicly, in the synagogue and in the market places, wherever he could gain a hearing. He also spoke to individuals and small assemblies “from house to house” (20).

Everyone soon learned of Paul’s passion to share the message of Jesus, something he was compelled to do because of his love for Christ and his compassion for those who needed Jesus. Paul proclaimed the whole gospel of Jesus to the entire populace, giving no preferential treatment to one particular category, whether religious, pagan, intellectual or ordinary, male or female. To him, all outside of Christ were in need of his grace.

And he gave the call to repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ. He told the need of all of us sinners to repent before a holy God and then gave the solution to our sin problem—faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection provided for our salvation (21). (See John Calvin’s discussion of the relationship of faith and repentance, pages 176f, below reference)

I too must prepare to leave IBC by faithfully preaching the word of God, and that word includes the message of salvation in Jesus and also the way of encouragement in spiritual direction and formation. Paul was so intent on the spiritual formation of those he taught that he compared his pain to that of a woman in childbirth (Galatians 4:19)! Thus, as I prepare for my eventual departure, I am to give myself to the hard work of weekly sermon preparation and then deliver those sermons with the power and anointing of God. Even at my age, I must continue to develop the gift of preaching in such a way that progress will be obvious to my congregation (1 Timothy 4:15).

The other elders and indeed all of the priesthood of the believers in this church must join in this ministry of proclamation and mutual encouragement in spiritual growth. As Paul needed the prayers of his fellow believers, so I need for you to surround and undergird me with your prayer support. And I must encourage you in your witness by your life and words to your own family and to all in your sphere of influence. And we need all of your support for this church's ministries of outreach, such as our English and Alpha classes.

For Paul, it was not enough to proclaim the message, but he also could leave with a clear conscience...

- *Having produced disciples*

Paul could leave Ephesus with a clear conscience because he taught "the whole will of God" (27). He left nothing out that might be helpful and he didn't just teach his favorite themes and preach old sermons. And his purpose was to equip the elders, who had learned from his teaching and whom he had equipped to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). I'm grateful for the godly men God has given and will continue to give us to serve as elders and share with me in the ministry of teaching, as in our Sunday School. Our work here at IBC is not just to introduce people to the message of salvation and lead them to an initial decision and commitment to Jesus as Lord. We are to make disciples who will continue obey everything that Jesus has commanded us (Matthew 28:19-20).

Before Paul could leave Ephesus with a clear conscience he had to know that he had prepared and equipped those who would continue to make disciples and also would protect God's people like good shepherds protect a flock of sheep (28ff). Only mature disciples can reproduce themselves in others and lead them to become mature followers of Jesus. And only the mature disciple can detect error that can creep into the church's teaching and then be able to refute that error with the truth of God's word.

In the past two weeks, a Bible study taking place in a Brussels hospital, led by one of our medical doctors, has been invaded by Ladder Day Saints (Mormon) missionaries (29). It takes a solid knowledge of the word and an understanding

of the error and false teaching of heretical sects in order to protect our flock from these “savage wolves,” who “distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (29f).

Paul warns that false teaching and misleading influences will arise from within the church itself, which is not a happy thought (30). How crucial it is that the church be prepared and vigilant against error and deception and spiritual declension! As FF Bruce points out, this internal error indeed did arise with a “general revolt against Paul’s teaching” in the Ephesian church. And the risen Christ, speaking through the Apostle John, rebukes the church in Ephesus for forsaking its first love (See FF Bruce, below, page 417 and 1 Timothy 1:19f; 4:1ff; 2 Timothy 1:15; 2:17f; 3:1ff and Revelation 2:1ff).

The other elders and I must prepare to leave the ministry at IBC Brussels someday, either by your choice or ours, and hopefully only by God’s will. And my prayer is that you and I will leave it with a good conscience, knowing we have been faithful to our charge. And your own family is your first place for proclamation and disciple making. It doesn’t matter how successful you may be in your public and church ministry if you neglect your own family. And someday your children will leave your home and the question will be, “Are you prepared for *them* to leave?” When they leave to attend college, join the military or take their first job, will your conscience be clear that they have believed the gospel and are following Jesus as Lord in a life of discipleship?

As did Paul, so must you and I prepare to leave this place...

➤ **With a good example**

A superficial look at Paul’s words in his letters and in our text might give the impression that he was like the arrogant professor who wrote the book, “Humility and How I Achieved It.” But of all people who had earned the right to be an example to others, Paul was indeed one, and he asked people to follow his example only as he followed Christ’s (1 Corinthians 11:1). Anyone who suffered for Christ as did Paul, and whose life was always under the scrutiny of critics, both inside and outside the church, was qualified to be an example to others, as he was to the Ephesian elders.

And when the time came for him to leave, he left a good example...

- *Of a godly character*

Paul’s life gave evidence of true holiness and not just rigid moral standards. He had come to realize, with his conversion to Christ away from Pharisaic legalism, that the law had been powerless to change his heart and his real character (Romans 8:1-4).

Now we see in his words to these Ephesian elders his heart of love for the people he served (19). Perhaps these were tears of compassion. He knew how to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15). His heart for others was like the heart of his Savior. Paul realized the great love of God, who “bought us with his own blood,” i.e. the blood of his own Son (28). He thus was called to love God’s people with the same kind of agape love.

Beginning with the principle fruit of love, the Holy Spirit produced the fruit of entire holiness in Paul’s life, which is what he called for in his charge to the elders (28). Paul admonished the elders to continue their growth in God’s grace, that they might be made holy and also become worthy examples to God’s people (32). Paul also was an example in how a godly servant leader regards material possessions. The churches were plagued with all sorts of charlatans, “wandering teachers and healers” who were out to make a profit. But Paul exhibited a “Christ-shaped, generous love that every minister must not only speak about but also model at every level” (See NT Wright, page 132, reference below). As we realize in recent days, the idol of materialism and greed can be very undependable and always leads to disappointment. Paul learned the secret of supporting himself with hard work (as a leather-worker), trusting God, and then using his material gain to give away to others.

I want to thank you for your generous support of your pastor, who makes his living from the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:14). I realize my need to be a good example to you in the management of our finances in personal stewardship. Not only do I want to avoid the acquisitiveness that “has been the downfall of many a servant of God” (Polhill, page 430, below), but also I want to be an example of how God desires to bless us and provide for us and gives to us that we can give to others. The way we relate to the material should be determined by our love for Christ and for others. Paul noted that regarding the material and financial, we are to follow the example of Christ in being those who give to help the weak and the needy (35).

Ephesus was an ungodly city, and Paul knew the moral pitfalls that these elders faced. It was absolutely essential that these church leaders be Spirit-filled and covered with God’s protection in this “snake-pit of dangerous influences”. Ephesus was a vibrant and strategic church, one which Satan desired to destroy. The devil doesn’t bother with “bland, culturally captive churches” which are no threat to Satan’s strangle-hold (See Ogilvie, page 247, below)

The same is true for God’s servant leaders. Those of us in teaching, leadership positions are particularly under attack and are thus under a stricter judgment because of our example to others (James 3:1). And our moral and spiritual example is perhaps our greatest legacy we can leave to this church. As Robert Murray McCheyne said, “My people’s greatest need is for my holiness.” To be

morally pure and to consistently bear the fruit of the Spirit requires our walking in step with the Spirit in an attitude of reverent fear and dependence on the Lord's leading and protection. It also requires the prayers of and our giving an account to the people we serve, for which Paul made a constant appeal (Ephesians 6:18f).

I identify with the confession of the great pastor, teacher and writer, AW Tozer: "Do you know who gives me the most trouble? Do you know who I pray for most in my pastoral work? Just myself," he said (Both this and the McCheyne quote are from Fernando, page 540 and 547, below). I must pray and I need you to pray that when I leave IBC Brussels it will be as having been a good example in godly character. And I have some growing to do in this regard.

And this is the resolve we all should share in our specific spheres of influence. What kind of a moral example are you giving to your children and to your work or school colleagues? What about the example we give in the regular and chance encounters we make in our daily life routine?

Amazingly and yet humbly, Paul left the elders and the church in Ephesus with an example...

- *Of a complete commitment*

Paul was totally "sold out" to Christ, who was his life (Colossians 3:4; Philippians 1:21). He was intent on following the Spirit's leading, whatever the cost might be to him personally. And he knew that prison and hardships always stared him in the face (22ff). Yet Paul was intent upon taking the way of Jesus, the way of the cross (Luke 9:23ff). He understood that the way of following Jesus and bearing witness for him was the way of mirroring Jesus' cruciform life (14:22, 2 Timothy 3:12). Paul's commitment was to finish the task, which was to be conformed to the character of Jesus and to do the work of spreading the message of Jesus and making disciples for the kingdom (verse 24 & Philippians 3:10; Romans 1:14ff).

Paul trusted that his life was in God's hands and that his life was indestructible until his task was completed and the purpose of God for his life on earth was accomplished. The Lord or his angelic representative appeared to Paul at key moments to reassure him of this. Even during the dangerous storm at sea, Paul could affirm that he and the other passengers would arrive safely because God's inexorable purpose for Paul was that he arrive in Rome and preach the message there (27:23f).

As John Piper notes, this assurance of God's sovereign control was "tremendously freeing" for Paul (See Piper reference below). He had no need to fear the future because all was in the hands of God. And this is an important message to us during these recent days of the tumbling down of the world's

financial condition. Even with all evidence to the contrary, we can trust God to see us through. This is also a vital message to the many around the world undergoing suffering and possible martyrdom for their faith in Christ.

Paul's commitment was simply to spend and be spent for the cause of Christ. Again, it was Piper who noted that for him this Paul-like commitment meant the relinquishing of the "American Dream" of a comfortable retirement (which in these recent days seems like a more remote possibility for many of us anyway!). As Piper says (see reference below), the American Dream is to retire when you're young enough to sit back and relax in the sun, maybe doing nothing more challenging than improving your golf score. The only problem with this dream is that it's not biblical. Piper says that synonyms for the word "retire" in the dictionary include "to withdraw from action or danger, to fall back, to go to bed," and "to march away from the enemy." Paul would have none of this retirement business and, whatever I might have in my pension account, I pray I will always be involved in active ministry until the day God calls me home. Even if I'm physically disabled, I pray I will be involved in some type of ministry that will be for the advancement of the kingdom and the glory of God.

I pray also, that when the time comes, I will leave this place...

➤ **With a longing heart**

Our text for today is surrounded by tears. Paul begins by saying how he had served them with humility and tears (19) and now when he says "good-bye" there once again is weeping (37). Obviously Paul loved these people dearly and they loved him as well. When it came time to say "farewell," the parting was emotional because the bond of love was strong. It's a lovely picture, of Paul kneeling with these elders and praying and then weeping over their imminent departure.

I too expect that when God calls Nancy and me to another place of service there will also be tears on our part, and over Nancy's departure, at least. I believe we'll leave with a longing heart. It will necessarily be with a longing heart...

- *Because of loving relationships*

We can assume that Paul had evangelized and disciplined some of these people, who regarded him as their spiritual father. No doubt Paul had ministered to some in a time of crisis or great need. During the three years close friendships had formed and many in the church were closely bonded with Paul, who had a great capacity for deep friendship and always reminded the people of his love and prayers for them. Paul reminded the rebellious Corinthians that he was their "father through the gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15).

And this is the way it should be when it's time for our departure from this fellowship called IBC Brussels. Some of you expatriates avoid forming friendships in the church because you realize the likelihood that you or your new friends will be parting ways in a year or two or three. But far sadder it is for you to miss the opportunity to make friends from other nations who will enrich your life, regardless of how short your time together here in Belgium. And it's a tragedy if you come to this country and are privileged to be a part of IBC and yet, when you leave no one feels the pain of or even knows about your departure.

As we look at the example of Paul, we should prepare to leave with a longing heart and a measure of real grief. Your friendship and fellowship should be significant enough to leave a painful void in the fellowship of this church and the hearts of your friends.

- *For a future reunion*

It was a painful departure when Paul said "good-bye." Along with Paul, they had an ominous sense of foreboding about Paul's future, being aware that they probably would not see his again (38). Here they were thinking of course of this mortal life. As Paul himself wrote to the Thessalonians, we do grieve the death of our fellow believers, but our grief, though painful, is not a hopeless grief, "like the rest of men, who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13ff). These elders grieved over their separation from Paul, which probably would eventually be also the separation of death. But I can't help but think that Paul would have reminded these grieving friends that their grief should be hope-filled and hope-mitigated grief.

I believe Paul would have spoken to them a reminder of the hope they had of an eventual reunion. And we too have the glorious prospect of our great reunion with all who have gone before us and who will come after us. But Luke mentions nothing of this hope. Instead he assumes it and seems to want us to see the value of our friendship and fellowship with our fellow believers and fellow members of the family of God. This emotional farewell should tell us that we are to form the kind of loving friendships that will rend our hearts when we have to say "good-bye." But that's just part of the beauty of our love for one another. How sad it would be if there were no sadness with your departure from us! I want to love and be loved so much and so dearly that I won't be the only one to weep when I finally leave IBC!

Conclusion:

All of us will eventually leave this place, by changing circumstances in life or even the end of life on this fallen earth. We need to prepare now for our eventual departure. I think of what Paul wrote at the very end of his earthly pilgrimage: "The time has come for my departure." Paul had no regrets and could say he

had fought the good fight and finished the race marked out for him to run. And he was confident that a crown of righteousness awaited him (2 Timothy 4:6-8). We need to prepare to leave with a clear conscience, a good example and legacy for our family, friends and church, and with a longing heart.

Sadly, this church at Ephesus didn't maintain the ardent love for the Lord which they had at first. Evidently they didn't continue with the legacy of Paul's love or the kind of love they felt for Paul. We don't know what happened to dampen their love for the Lord, but they were called by the risen Christ to repentance before they lost the effectiveness of their witness (Revelation 2:1-7). We prepare best to leave when we are filled with the love of Christ and his church, seeking to fulfill the Great Commandment to love God entirely and our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:28ff).

None of us knows the time of his/her parting or our final departure at the end of our mortal life. None of us knows when we will find ourselves saying "good-bye" to IBC Brussels or to earthly life itself. As I read in the word this morning, the time of the Lord's coming is near. Thus I must prepare to meet the One who is "standing at the door" and to whom I must give an account (James 5:8f). I want to hear him say "Well done" (Matthew 25:21).

I know that I have some work to do to prepare for my departure from IBC and from mortal life. You also might have some work to do to prepare for the departure of your grown children, who will say "good-bye" as they leave for university or their first job and independent living. You may have some work to do to prepare to leave your job for a new work place; or your time with us here at IBC may be drawing to a close. There are things we can do and changes in our lives that can take place in order for us to prepare for that tearful yet regret-less time of departure.

Join me in asking God to prepare us to leave.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What are some difficult "parting experiences in your life, when you had to say a tearful "good-bye" to family members, friends or church?
2. Were there any thoughts and/or feelings of regret at the time of your departure?
3. What would have made your departure less painful?

4. What are some practical things you should do to prepare for your eventual departure from the church where you belong?
5. What are some other “departures,” such as your grown children leaving home, even the death of a loved one, for which you should prepare?
6. List some resolutions you should make to prepare for your departure from your present residence, including your school, job, neighbors and church.
7. Ask God to speak to you about some changes that must take place for you to experience a good “departure.”

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