Overseers of God's flock - Rev Ewen Matheson

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Preacher: Rev. Ewen Matheson

[0:00] For a few moments, let's turn together to a reading in the book of Acts chapter 20. Maybe we can read again from verse 25.

! Acts 20 and reading from verse 25. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone out about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.
Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.
Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.
I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.
[1:13] Therefore be alert. Remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.
Our attention, especially this evening on verse 28. Acts 20, verse 28. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.
As we come to this passage and from verse 17 of chapter 20 of the book of Acts, we recognize immediately an aspect of the solemnity of this passage, because Paul here is recognizing that he has an opportunity of what is a farewell address.
And we note that even as we reread some of these verses in verse 25 especially, that he has called the elders from Ephesus to come to him.
[2:36] And he speaks of this as the last time that he will see them. And so he takes the opportunity to teach them. And within that opportunity, he recognizes that he is able to say something to the church.

And as we consider and reflect upon what it is that he says, we are immediately struck that he delivers this message with a great deal of passion.
That's very clear from the words that he uses and the manner that this is recorded for us. But also we are told in verse 36, he doesn't just deliver this passionately, but also prayerfully.
He knelt down and prayed with them all. The apostle is fully invested. Fully invested in his loving concern for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.
And he declares that he has taken this responsibility upon himself. He says in verses 18 and 19 of how he lived among them, serving the Lord with all humility and tears and with all trials.
[3:51] And he continues to weave this through these words. But then in verses 27 and 28 and where our thoughts are concentrated this evening, we see here that he now is tasking others.

And in verses 36 and 37, he departs from them, leaving this as the final charge and instruction. He has brought the Ephesian elders here to him.
As he himself is on his way to Jerusalem. In verse 16, we're told that they sail past Ephesus because they are in a hurry to reach Jerusalem.
But he himself is in a hurry to address the elders of Ephesus. And to address them in how they are to care for the congregation. And care for God's people.
And he uses this kind of pastoral language. And the language of oversight. And the language of investment. And it is all driven by the call of God.

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[5:00] And the love for God's people. We come here this evening on a significant night in the life of the congregation. A night of which there has been much preparation and much prayer.

A night in which we recognize the answer to prayer. And we come here ourselves filled with our own expectations, don't we? We think in our own minds that we know what an elder should be like. What they should look like and what they should act like. And we come often with our own preconceived ideas. Sometimes these ideas of what an elder should be like are really far too strenuous.
And yet we come to recognize that there is a standard. But the standard is not a standard that we've invented in our own imagination. But we know that the role of the elder is described to us by the scripture.
And we've been taught from our early days that the scriptures are our only role. This is what we expect from elders.
[6:15] It is contained within the word of God. And as we try and apply ourselves to such a task, we want to understand it better. And we realize that we need to engage ourselves in the biblical instruction in that regard.

And this, of course, is one of the great passages that describes to us the role of the elder. As Paul is here conveying this instruction, and it is for him something very timely, because he needs these elders to be active and to be engaged and to be concerned.
He recognizes that their task is a joyous task, but also a solemn task. And he recognizes that these men are a provision for God's people.
And we stand in the same situation. We recognize that this is a privilege to serve in this way. There is joy in it. It is a solemn task.
But it is also a provision for God's people. And we do not take this lightly. And those who have come here today to offer themselves in service as elders are not taking this lightly.
[7:34] But rather we come here this evening in recognition of the authority of God's word in our lives, in our world, in our church. And we see here in verse 28, the expectations.

And I want us just to consider three points here this evening as we think and reflect on this. And first of all, in verse 28, they have been made overseers.
And so this language immediately strikes us that this is the word that Paul is using to describe this role. And the word in the Greek is episkopos, where in English we have the word episkopalian or bishop.
And this word is used interchangeably in the New Testament with what we have in verse 17. He called the elders. And that word elders here is where we get the word presbyter from.
And so these two words, presbyter and episkopos, that they are used interchangeably. It is the same group. It is the same men. They are described in this way and in this manner.
[8:49] And as we'll see in a moment too, that one of the descriptions of them, of the elders, of the overseers, is shepherds.

They are the same men. It is the same role. It is the same function. And what Paul is describing here is that great office in the church, in the New Testament church, of the spiritual leadership of the congregation.
And it comes to people and comes to men in terms of a calling. They are called to this.
Pay careful attention to yourselves and to the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.
And he speaks to them as a group. And it is collective. They have been appointed and set apart to this task.
[9:51] They are qualified by the calling of God in and through the Holy Spirit and through the church. This is how we understand how the church functions.

That into the offices of the New Testament church, there is a divine calling. And the function and the parameters of which are contained within the church.
The Holy Spirit calls people, equips people, qualifies people. The Holy Spirit is present in the life of the church.
He is constantly in the church. We ought not to think of the Holy Spirit as the one who comes in and out of the church at certain points. He is always present, always with us, and enabling the church to function as it should.

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And bringing us under the conviction of the teaching of God's Word in how the church is to be administered. God is a God of order. Creation displays that.
[11:00] The order of which God has set everything. And in the church there is to be order. And there is to be office in order for the church to function and to fulfill its role.

And He calls men, spiritual men, into this role. We're conscious ourselves that it is through people that God is at work in His church.
And however spiritual people may be, they are still people. They are still men. And we come short in so many ways.
And we need grace. We need God's grace. And yet this is how God functions, how His church functions. He calls men in to office.
And it is the work of the Holy Spirit and an answer of the prayer of God's people to have spiritual leadership. They are called, in verse 28, the overseers.
[12:14] This is what they're called to do. Their task is to oversee. This is a very solemn calling. It is a great privilege and a humbling blessing to undertake this responsibility where God calls you to serve Him in this way, to serve His church.

And it's His church that is to be served. He says in verse 28, overseers, to care for the church, to care for all the flock.
He speaks of the flock here in verse 29. And to be responsible for all of them. And this is our role and our duty.
In our own practice, in the terms of how our churches are brought together, especially in our rural communities, we often divide the districts and we give people certain responsibilities within a certain village or villages.
But it ought never to restrain or inhibit us. For we are not to be elders just of a small group of people, but all the flock.
[13:29] And the responsibility belongs to all the elders. And not only so, it goes beyond in our own conviction of the government and administration of the church that we belong to a presbytery and elders have responsibility to the presbytery.

And we belong to a denomination and we have responsibility to our general assembly. And here, Paul is speaking in this collective way.
And we, in some way, try to display this, even as vows are taken, vows to carcassion, presbytery, and general assembly to recognize that we are to contribute to the entire life of the church, to play our part, to take our responsibility.
And as he speaks here with respect to the overseers, we recognize that what Paul is saying here and elsewhere speaks specifically of the qualifications of those into eldership with respect to their character.
He speaks to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 3. An overseer must be above reproach. The husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.
[15:05] He must manage his own household well with all dignity, keeping his children submissive. And then he goes on to say he must not be a recent convert. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders.

And he continues in the same manner when he speaks to Titus of making elders in Crete. And in Titus chapter 1 in verses 5 to 9 he describes this.
And again he repeats the same thing of being above reproach. And then he goes on in verse 7. An overseer must be God's steward above reproach.
He must not be arrogant. He must not be quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy. He must hold firm the word of truth. And he speaks there of the reputation and the character of the elder.
And the need for consistency, for maturity of thought, for the sense too of that hospitality and welcome that is inviting and warm.
[16:13] He must be a teacher and encourager of God's people. He must be an example to the community. And he must display that leadership that is a servant leadership.

that is invested and interested in people and invested and interested in the cause of Christ. And so it's a reminder to us, isn't it, to take care of our character, to recognize the importance of our integrity, to consider our own witness.

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He calls us here with regards to the eldership that they are made overseers. Secondly, he speaks that this is for the flock. Verse 28, to all the flock.
And here is the sphere of influence and responsibility, what he is charging us to, the care of the whole flock. A reminder, of course, again, as if we need reminding, that the church is not a building. It's people. It's souls. And a reminder also that the church is not our possession.
[17:37] It's God's. He has the ownership. It's his flock. It's his people.

It's his church. And they are precious to him. Take care of the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.
This is how he purchased the flock, through his own blood, blood. Here is the good shepherd, laying down his life for his flock.
And his flock, they know him. They hear his voice. And he has sent overseers to care for his flock, his church.
The Holy Spirit here, of course, we find teaching of the triune God here involved in the life of his church. but we see here Christ as the good shepherd, the good shepherd of this flock.
[18:44] And as we consider and think upon the cost to Christ of saving his flock, it brings us to value these people, to value the church, to love the bride of Christ, to have love for his people, a blood bought people.

If Christ thinks they are precious, so must I, so must all the elders, so must all the people of God. They have been bought as a flock, as one people. and it is he, as the good shepherd, who has given the government and the administration of the church to those whom he calls into office.
And we see this by example. We see this by the example of Paul, as he has declared here to the church, the elders in Ephesus, how he has been driven by his calling, and driven by his love, to serve faithfully.
And maybe many of us can think, even in our early Christian life, of those elders who set such a great example to us, how they displayed themselves faithful, loving, caring, invested.
[20:22] And it was an example for us to follow and embrace this calling in the same manner and in the same way, the call to love and serve the flock.

For us, this is a very familiar picture, this pastoral image that God displays to us throughout the Bible of his people as being like sheep and being like a flock.
it's something that is itself very recognizable to us. And when we think of sheep, we know that they are vulnerable and they require to be led.
And the kind of leadership that they require is somebody who is involved and somebody who is there, somebody who is with them and known to them.
And the kind of leadership that they need is something that is active and something that is clear.
And this is what Paul is calling these men to for the final time.
[21:39] He wants this as something that is in their consciousness as they think about what God has for them to do and how they are to serve him.

We think of the overseers, we think of the flock, but thirdly and finally we think of the care. Because this is what he is calling us to, isn't it, in verse 28.
Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock to care for the church of God. He calls us to care, to care for the church of God.
The King James Version actually translates this word care as feed, and the New International Version translates this word as shepherd.
And all of these translations, including this one, are valid translations of this word. They have this shared imagery imagery, that is a shepherd imagery.
[22:44] We know a shepherd has to feed the flock. We know a shepherd has to shepherd the sheep. We know a shepherd has to care for the sheep. And so we understand how this metaphor is speaking to us of the reality of what we are to display, that we are to care for the people, the flock.

And he tells us why we have to care. In verse 29, fish, wolves, are coming. The flock's vulnerable. You need to really care.
You need to be involved. You need to protect. You need to lead. You need to ensure that you are not naive, that there is danger everywhere, that the flock are in a dangerous place, morally, spiritually, theologically.
He speaks of this, especially in verse 29. And he calls us to be careful in verse 28, to yourselves and to the flock.

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Look out for the danger to your own soul and to the people of God. I've been reading in the morning something of John Newton's letters to his adopted daughter.
[24:08] Just a couple of days ago, there was a part of the letter which he spoke to her of the trials of the Christian life as he's trying to encourage her as she's beginning to follow the Lord.

And he tells her not to be surprised by danger. And in fact, that's the way that the Christian makes the best use of trials.
Not to be surprised, but to be expecting them. Otherwise, we are not going to make use of the trials.
And what's important in that respect and what we have here is that we cannot be naive.
We need to understand that there are difficulties. We need to understand that there is danger. We need to understand that there is fierce wolves.
We need to understand that there is a roaring lion. We need to be able to understand God's word and the age in which we live in.
[25:12] We need to recognize that sometimes people are beginning to stray. We need to be able to ensure that we are not distant or uninvolved, but that we are constantly driven by this care and this love and acknowledging that there are trials to be expected and to be willing, of course, to listen and to look out for the good of others.

He is asking them to pour themselves into this task, to not hold anything back, to recognize what that privilege it is, and to give themselves to this willingly.
Peter, of course, speaks in the same manner in 1 Peter chapter 5. I exhort you, the elders among you, as a fellow elder, shepherd the flock of God, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you, not for shameful game, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.
And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. There may be dangers all around, threatening to harm the flock, but the spiritual leader is there to give protection, to undertake the task with solemnity and seriousness.
The church needs men who know, who know the times, who know the word of God, who know God, who love His cause, who love His people, who are concerned and involved.
[27:17] It is important for the church to have good men, to stand into this role, to protect the sheep, and to be zealous.

This is part of our spiritual heritage, especially in our highland evangelicalism, where the men played such a significant role in the life of the church, and in the cause of Jesus Christ, throughout our highlands and islands, and stood boldly on the side of truth, and cared for the people of God. They knew the flock. And this is what we're to do. We're to know the flock. We're to be with them and be alongside them. We're to encourage them.
We're to nurture them. We're to pray for them. We're to help them and give them the answer to their question. It calls, of course, even in terms of its very name for spiritual maturity, to be an elder.
It speaks of courage to be a shepherd. It speaks of responsibility to be an overseer, and to promote all that is good. This is a great office, and it's a great privilege to serve in it.
[28:34] And it is a great blessing to the people of God to have such a provision, and to maintain a focus of what the Bible teaches, and to see men who are giving themselves to this task sacrificially.

And, of course, no one here is a finished article. we are constantly learning, seeking to humbly serve, and deciding more than anything else the good of the kingdom of God, and to grow in the calling and the effectiveness and the responsibility.
Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.
Amen. Let's pray together. Gracious and most holy God, we give thanks to you for your word, for its teaching and instruction that is so essential and necessary in our own lives, in our offices and stations, and especially in the life and administration of your church.
We pray for your people. We pray for your cause. We pray for all who serve as elders in the church. Bless us and be near to us, we pray, and forgive us our sins, in Jesus' name.
[30:05] Amen. We're going to continue in our praise by turning to page 157. Page 157, where we have Psalm 119.

We're going to sing this first part. Blessed are those of blameless ways who live according to God's word.

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Blessed are those who keep his laws, who with their whole heart seek the Lord. They keep themselves from doing wrong by walking in his perfect ways. You have established laws for us that are to be obeyed always.
And so on. To the end of the verse, Mark 8, Psalm 119, verses 1 to 8. The praise of God. Blessed are those of blameless ways who live according to God's word.
Blessed are those who keep his laws, who with their whole hearts seek the Lord.
[31:34] Lord. They keep themselves from doing wrong by walking in his perfect ways.

You have established laws for us that are to be obeyed always.
who who has won't all for us? Do not see my ways. Where set us for?
Lord. In making you decrease my aim.
So when I think on your commands, I would not feel disgrace or shame.
[32:56] I'll praise you with an upright heart, as your just laws are learned by me.

All your decrees I will obey. Do not forsake me utterly.
We're now to move to the induction of our elders.
And as we do so, I'm going to begin by giving a very brief narrative. This has already been conveyed to the congregation by edict. But I want to just give this brief narrative of the steps that have brought us here this evening.
On Wednesday, the 14th of October, 2026, the Caccession of Barbra's Free Church appointed an election of elders to take place. The congregation made choice of Murdo Nicholson and Alistair MacLeod as elders.
[34:20] And the session, having judged them duly qualified for the office, and their having intimated their acceptance of office, Caccession did appoint the ordination and admission to take place on 8th November, 2026.

That's the narrative of the steps. And we're now to move to the questions. And as we do so, ask Murdo and Alistair to please stand. And I'll put these questions to you, if maybe Murdo would answer first, and then Alistair immediately afterwards.
Do you believe that the scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments are the word of God and the only rule of faith and practice? Do you sincerely own and declare the whole doctrine of the Westminster Confession of Faith as accepted by general assemblies of this church to be the truth contained in the Old and New Testaments?
And do you affirm the confession to be the confession of your faith to which you will constantly adhere? Do you own and acknowledge the Presbyterian form of church government to be the only government of this church?
And do you promise not to directly or indirectly subvert or prejudice it, but submit to it and to concur with it?
[35:52] Do you believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head of the Church, has appointed a government in the church in the hands of church officers distinct from and not subordinate in its own sphere to civil government and that civil government has no jurisdiction over the regulation of the affairs of Christ's church?

Do you approve the general principles embodied in the historic disruption documents of 1842 and 1843 as declaring the views authorized by the word of God and the standards of this church with respect to the spirituality and freedom of the church of Christ and her subjection to Him as her only head and to His word as her only standard?
Do you promise to observe uniformity of worship and the administration of all public ordinances within this church as presently performed and allowed?
Do you accept the office of elder of this congregation and promise through grace to faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully perform all the duties of an elder?
Thank you. I'm going to ask you now to sign the formula in the presence of the congregation so the session clerk will give you direction and the formula just has within it the questions that have just been answered so this will be part of the record of the cut session.
[37:59] Amen. We'll now pray and induct Bordeaux and Auster into the office of Elder.

Our Father in heaven, we give thanks to you for your kindness and goodness, for your provisions towards us as a people, for your provisions towards our souls and the care thereof, and of our communities and our people.

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We thank you, Lord, for all who are serving in office in the church, and we thank you today as we set aside Mordeaux and Auster as elders in the congregation and induct and admit them therein. We pray for them, Lord. We thank you for their willingness to serve. We thank you for their qualifications. We thank you for the manner in which they display themselves in the congregation and in the community.
And we pray that you would equip them by your grace, that you would keep them and bless them, and help them to fulfill the task that has been given to them today, and to fulfill the duties therein as well, as we welcome them as part of this cut session.
[39:16] And we pray that you would bless them in their own hearts and souls, in their families and in their homes too. We pray that you would encourage us, Lord, as we recognize the answer to prayer here as well.

Be with us then, we pray, and forgive us our sins in Jesus' name. Amen. And as we admit you into the Office of Elders, I would like to invite you to take the right hand of fellowship from the cut session.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. You can sit down now and you can continue.
As we turn together to Hebrews and chapter 13, it's my duty as we engage in the induction to address both the office bearers, the new office bearers, and also the congregation.
[40:42] so I just want to take a few minutes to do that before we close the service. Hebrews chapter 13, I'm going to read first of all verse 7. Hebrews 13, verse 7, Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.

Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. But especially, if you will, verse 17. Hebrews chapter 13, verse 17, Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.
Let him do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. I think this verse captures aspects of what we've just been considering together in Acts chapter 20, and captures therein both the joy and also the solemnity of the task that the Lord has set you aside to. And as we do so, we recognize, first of all, that this is a privilege and an honor. And it is a privilege and an honor from God.
God has called you to this. He has done so through his church, and through therein, the church voting together and seeking that you would serve in this way.
[42:18] But it is a tremendous blessing that humbles us to think that we are involved in caring for God's church and to be overseeing his flock. And we realize for such a privilege and such a high honor, we need the grace of God.

We need God's grace to help us, to uphold us in it, and to protect us. But we're called by faith to trust and believe in God's promises.
And God promises to do this for us. If we wait upon him and trust in him, he will help us with this great and high task.
I think these verses, verse 7 and verse 17, also remind to us the reality of the example, the whole concept of being an elder, a spiritual leader, includes within it the reality of this sense of example. We saw together that Paul was fully invested in that. And he gave himself lovingly and willingly and in a very clear and transparent manner, seeking to be a faithful man in the life of the church and displaying that the way and manner that we serve, the Lord and the Lord's cause, it's in the same way in which we are called to the gospel.
[43:46] The good shepherd comes, and he says, follow me. And that is especially through that sense of following in serving and leading. It is a servant leadership.

It calls for humility, to humble ourselves, and it calls us to a closeness with our Lord, communion and companionship with him.
We learn to lead through him and through his word. It's a privilege. It's a call to be an example. But I want to say thirdly and finally to you today, Mordor and Aosta, that you are meeting a need.
You are here because there's a need to be met. There is a requirement in the church. Amongst God's people, there are duties to do.
The Lord calls us to serve and to help, and he's put it on your heart today to do this. And I would encourage you to do this completely and fully.

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[44:56] I want to just speak briefly to the congregation, too, as we gather like this, and as you're part of what is going on here this evening, you are here listening to vows being taken, questions answered, men taking up these roles of responsibility, responsibility, and the realization for ourselves that this is a provision that God has met for this congregation.

In summary, this is for you. This is for your benefit. And it's for the greatest benefit of your life. It's for the benefit of your soul. It's for your spiritual good and your spiritual blessing. We are told here in verse 17, they are accountable for your spiritual well-being.
The elders here have got that great responsibility, and it's a heavy burden to carry to have that sense of accountability. And so I'm urging you to engage yourself in that.
I'm asking you to do all that you can to be led in this way. To do all that you can that here in verse 17, that it will be done with joy, that they would find it a joy to be accountable to you.
[46:24] Do your best for the cause of Christ. Be intentional with regard to the church and the cause. Be an encouragement.

Cultivate what is good. Recognize that as a member, you have a responsibility. And part of that responsibility is to grow spiritually, to display more and more of the fruit of the Spirit, to develop your own life of faith.
And we know that as we think of all of these things and as we think of the life of the church and as we've already spoken of, the devil is here wanting to cause problems.
But the thing with that is that's what we're expecting. We're expecting him to try and cause problems. We're not naive.
And whatever he arrays against us, we have God. We have a good shepherd. And we have a purpose.
[47:37] He is calling us to be a flock. He is calling us to unity. He is calling us to witness. He is calling us to follow the leadership that he gives to us.

Let us do it thankfully and prayerfully. And let us honor the gifts that God gives to us. We need men in the life of the church to take up the roles of leadership.
And we pray for this. Let us give thanks when God gives to us these gifts. Amen. May the Lord bless our thoughts together.
I want to intimate to the congregation that the names of Mordo and Alistair are now added to the role of the Kirk session. And we're going to sing in a moment.
And thereafter, the session will close with the benediction. And as the service closes, I'll go to the door and ask Alistair Mordo to go to the door as well and shake hands with those who are leaving.
[48:46] But I encourage you again just for a few moments to stay behind for some tea and to encourage Alistair Mordo some more. Let's turn then to Psalm 84 on page 338.

Page 338, Psalm 84. We're going to sing in closing verses 1 to 5. How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts, to me.
The tabernacles of thy grace, how pleasant, Lord, they be. My thirsty soul longs vehemently, yea, faints thy courts to see. My very heart and flesh cry out, O living God, for thee.
Verse 4. Blessed are they in thy house that dwell. They ever give thee praise. Blessed is the man whose strength are worth, and whose heart are thy ways. Let's stand and remain standing for the benediction as we sing these words.
How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts, to me, that the tabernacles of thy grace, how blessed, Lord, they be.
[50:16] My thirsty soul of fame and leave, yea, face thy course to see.

My very heart of flesh cry out, O living God, for thee.
Behold the sparrow findeth thou an house wherein to rest.
The swallow also for herself that purchase said an end.
In thine old alters where she saved, her young ones forth may bring.
[51:46] O thou almighty Lord of hosts, who art my God and King.

Blessed are they in thy house that dwell. They ever give thee praise.
Blessed is the monk who strength the Lord, in whose heart are thy ways.
Amen. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. Amen.
Thank you.

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