

A Final Farewell

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Date: 29 December 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if we could, this evening, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read, the book of Acts, Acts chapter 20, and if we read the last few verses of the chapter, verse 36, Acts chapter 20 at verse 36, and when he had said these things, this is Paul, when Paul had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all, and there was much weeping on the part of all.

They embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken that they would not see his face again, and they accompanied him to the ship.

Now, as you know, it's often said that the hardest word to say is goodbye. The hardest word to say is goodbye, and that's certainly true when it comes to those whom we have loved and those whom we have lost in this world.

It's always hard to let go and say goodbye for the last time before someone passes away, and it's particularly hard, especially, as you know, at this time of year, where for many it's a festive season, and it's happy for some, but it's always heartbreaking for others, and it's always because no one likes to say goodbye.

No one likes to say goodbye, and that's also true this evening. No one likes to say goodbye, and although this is not a bereavement, although sometimes it feels like one, it's not a bereavement.

[1 : 4 1] This is not a bereavement. This is a break. It's a break. It's a break in a bond between pastor and people that God has initiated, and God has instructed, and who are we to question him?

No one likes to say goodbye. And yet, what's interesting, I always like to look up words. The word goodbye originates from the 16th century, 1570s, if you want to be precise, and it comes from the farewell phrase, boys and girls, God be with you.

God be with you. That's what the word goodbye means, which means that although goodbye is the hardest word to say, goodbye is actually the best word to say at a final farewell, because it means God be with you.

Goodbye. God be with you. And you know, in many ways, that's the message Paul had for the congregation and community of Ephesus when he gave them a final farewell. All he could say to them was goodbye.

God be with you. And I want us to think about this passage this evening. I want us to think about Paul's final farewell, and I want us to use three headings. Of course, they'll have alliteration.

[2 : 5 9] You've come to expect that from me. So the first one is a farewell explanation, a farewell exhortation, and a farewell encouragement.

A farewell explanation, then a farewell exhortation, then a farewell encouragement. So it's a final farewell. So first of all, a farewell explanation. A farewell explanation.

Look at verse 18. It says there, When they came to him, this is Paul, he said to them, this is him speaking to the elders at Ephesus, You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility, and with tears, and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

How I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks, of repentance towards God, and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's relationship with the congregation and community of Ephesus, it began in 52 AD. 52 AD, so it was about just less than 20 years after the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

[4 : 16] But when Paul arrived at the wealthy seaport city of Ephesus, he was on his third missionary journey. He was traveling through Europe, preaching the gospel, the good news of Jesus, and he was also planting new churches.

And usually Paul, when he reached a place and preached to a community, he wouldn't stay long. Usually he would just move on from place to place after a few months. But when Paul arrived in Ephesus, he stayed, as we read, he stayed there for about three years.

And he became part and partial of the congregation and the community in Ephesus. And when you read through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, you realize how much he loved the people and how much he loved the place.

Because Ephesus, it was a beautiful place to live. In fact, it was called Ephesus. The reason it was called Ephesus is because Ephesus means desirable. And for many people, including the Apostle Paul, the ancient seaport city of Ephesus was a desirable place to live.

But the thing I want you to remember about the Ephesians, and boys and girls, I want you to remember this too, is the Ephesians were sherochs. Always remember this. The Ephesians were sherochs.

[5 : 32] And I say that because the seaport city of Ephesus, it was situated along the west coast of, as Paul said there, Asia, which is now modern-day Turkey.

So the west coast of Turkey is where Ephesus was situated. And like many of you, the Ephesians, they would also have agreed that east-west, Thibshir is best.

East-west, Thibshir is best. I've always been told that for the last ten years. The Ephesians would have also said that west is best because, like many of you, the Ephesians, they were sherochs.

They lived in a beautiful place with beautiful beaches and beautiful buildings. And Ephesus really did have beautiful buildings. When you look it up, you can Google it yourself.

You see all these beautiful buildings. But prior to the gospel arriving in Ephesus, the Ephesians, they had built this large temple to the Greek goddess Artemis.

[6 : 28] And the temple was a huge temple. It was double the size of any other Greek temple, making it one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. But Ephesus, it was not only a beautiful place, it also was a busy place because Ephesus, it was this key trade route into the other parts of Asia.

It was located along the Aegean Sea, so there was all these ships that would come in. All the trade of the time would come in to the hustle and bustle of this seaport city, and then they would all go inland to all the different cities in the region.

But even though Ephesus was a desirable place to live, it was a difficult place to live because Ephesus was known for its idolatry, and it was known also for its immorality.

Because with a prominent and this prestigious temple right in the center of the city, that often meant two things. It meant temple priests and temple prostitutes.

It was a money-making opportunity. The city was obsessed with money, and it took advantage, full advantage, of this desire for more money.

[7 : 38] They would sell all these little silver shrines of the Greek goddess Artemis, and they would distribute them all over the ancient world. And with so many men who were passing through the city, all these tradesmen, and they were passing on the trade route through Ephesus, the temple prostitutes also made an impressive income for the city, making Ephesus actually a place that you would describe in the first century as sin city.

And yet in 52 AD, into that dark context, and that dark culture of idolatry and immorality, the Lord sent Paul. And he sent Paul to preach the gospel, and to plant a church, and to place a lampstand in a cosmopolitan and commercial city.

And we read, when you read through the previous chapter, read it yourself when you go home, in Acts chapter 19, you read there that the Lord began to work in the hearts and lives of all these sherochs. Because by God's grace, many people, they were transformed by the gospel.

And they turned from their idolatry to worshipping the living and true God. In fact, the gospel had such an impact and such an influence upon the community of Ephesus that the church in Ephesus became a light in darkness.

It became a light, it became a beacon on the west side or the west coast of Turkey. But you know, for Paul, as a preacher, he not only loved the Lord, and he loved the lost, he also had a love for the Lord's people.

[9 : 09] Which is why, when it came to the seaport city, Paul not only preached the gospel and placed a lampstand and planted a church, he also loved the congregation and community of Ephesus so much that he wanted to see them grow.

He wanted to see them grow in grace and in the knowledge of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And so 10 years after planting the church in Ephesus, Paul wrote a letter to them in AD, or 62 AD.

So he planted the church in 52 AD, he sends a letter in 62 AD. And he knew these sheroes so well, he knew them for the past 10 years. And so Paul knew what to write and he knew what to say to them.

Providentially, as a congregation, for those who would be out midweek, we've been studying Paul's letter to the Ephesians through the past year. And when we've studied Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we discovered that it's a unique letter.

It's unlike many of Paul's other letters because in many of Paul's other letters to the other churches in the region, Paul was always dealing with division. He was dealing with heresy.

[10 : 20] He was dealing with false teachers or counterfeit Christians. But Paul doesn't mention any of these problems with the sheroes. Because as a church, the sheroes were faithfully plowing away in their furrow.

That's what they were doing. On the west side of Turkey, they were faithfully plowing away in their furrow. But as a seasoned pastor, and having known them for 10 years, Paul knew that when things are going well, there's always that temptation to become comfortable and to become complacent.

There's always the temptation to lose focus and even forget the Lord. Which is why, after 10 years of knowing all these sheroes, Paul, he encouraged and he exhorted the Ephesians in his letter to keep going.

He told them to keep going. And as we studied, we studied Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Great letter. Read it when you get home. It's a letter that's split into two sections.

Chapters 1 to 3 are full of encouragements. Chapters 4 to 6 are full of exhortations. Paul encourages us right at the beginning of his letter. He reminds us about all the blessings and benefits of salvation.

[11 : 37] That as Christians, we're blessed with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ. That's what he says in chapter 1. In chapter 2, he encourages us that we're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Then you come into chapter 3. He encourages us that the length and breadth and depth and height of God's love has been displayed and demonstrated to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

So chapters 1 to 3 of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, full of encouragements. Then chapters 4 to 6, they're full of exhortations. These commands, these exhortations to watch how we walk.

That's what he says in chapter 4. He says, live as God's children in chapter 5. And then in the final chapter, we've been looking at it over the past number of weeks, he says, stand firm against the wiles of the devil and fight the good fight of faith by putting on the whole armor of God.

Paul knew these Shiroch so well, he knew what to say to them and he knew how to say it. But you know, what's obvious is that after 10 years of getting to know the Ephesians and having spent time preaching in public as well as, what he says there, visiting them house to house, personally visiting their homes in private.

[12 : 55] What Paul is clear on here is that he loved these Shirochs. He loved the Ephesians, which is why he found it hard to leave them.

He found it very hard to leave them. And as Paul said, a final farewell, he gave what is a farewell explanation. He explains to them why he's leaving. He stays there in verse 22.

Behold, now behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and affliction awaits me.

Paul explains that he was leaving the Ephesians not because of any particular chaos. There was no controversy in the congregation. He was leaving because he was being constrained by the Holy Spirit.

In other words, the Lord was leading him. The Word was directing him. And the Spirit was constraining him to preach the gospel elsewhere. And as Paul confesses, he will probably encounter obstacles.

[14 : 03] He will experience opposition for the gospel to where he's going. And yet he knew the reality was the people will be different, but the problems will be the same.

The people will be different, but the problems will all be the same. Because as you all know by now, the heart of the problem is always the problem of the heart.

And the only remedy to our ruin is in repentance and faith. That's what Paul says. Repentance and faith. Repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ. That's the only remedy to our ruin.

The people will be different, but the problems will be the same. But you know, what Paul says there in verse 24 is really telling of Paul's view of ministry. But he says there in verse 24, I do not account my life of any value, nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

In other words, Paul sees his ministry as that wherever he's sent and wherever he serves the Lord, he will do it wholeheartedly by God's grace and to God's glory.

[15 : 25] Paul sees his ministry as wherever he's sent and wherever he serves the Lord, he will do it wholeheartedly by God's grace and to God's glory. And that's how every servant of the Lord should be.

And so as Paul says a final farewell, he gives this farewell explanation. But then secondly, he gives a farewell exhortation. There's a farewell exhortation. Look at verse 25.

It says there in verse 25, And now behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone 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.

Now as you can imagine, the past number of weeks have been difficult and draining both physically and emotionally.

[16 : 33] But not just for me as your minister, for all of us as a family. There are so many people and so many places on the west side that we'll miss.

So many people, so many places. And it's been hard packing up a house that we have made out home for the past ten years. And we really did make it home.

We view this place as home. And we see you, as we've said many times, as a family. So it's hard to leave your family. But as we come to the end of an era and I suppose the end of a chapter, for the last number of weeks I've been reflecting and remembering a lot.

A lot of different experiences. A lot of different encounters. And you know, reading Paul's words to the elders at Ephesus there, that when he said there that in his time with him as a congregation and as a community, he faithfully proclaimed the message of the kingdom and fearlessly preached, as he says, he preached the whole counsel of God.

You know, reading Paul's words, they brought me back ten years. And they brought me back to 2014 to what I was asked by presbytery. So just before I was inducted to the congregation here and ordained, you do trials for ordination.

[17 : 54] You have to sit in front of the whole presbytery and they ask you questions. You're grilled. And so before the induction, I was grilled before I became the minister of Barbers.

And when I was being grilled at the trial for ordination, the presbytery asked me the question, and this is what I was thinking about the other day, they said, Murdo, how are you going to preach the whole counsel of God to the people of Barvis?

How are you going to preach the whole counsel of God to the people of Barvis? And I remember saying to them at the age of 26, totally green, saying to them, well, I'm going to preach through the teaching contained in the Shorter Catechism because the whole counsel of God is found in it.

And one of the first studies we did on a Sunday evening was on the Shorter Catechism. It covers creation, the fall, redemption, glorification.

And over the past 10 years, we've looked, as you know, we've looked at various bits of the Bible and various books of the Bible. We studied the lives of Noah and the life of Joseph in Genesis.

[19 : 03] We went 10 rounds with God. Remember how all these plagues took place in Egypt. And we saw the Exodus through the Red Sea. We learned some of the house rules of the Ten Commandments.

We saw Jesus tabernacling among his people when we studied the tabernacle in the wilderness and we used a model for it. We touched on the promises in Deuteronomy, the warnings in Judges, the hope in Joshua.

We followed the love story of Ruth. We then went into 1 Samuel, but we didn't get very far because, well, hitherto hath the Lord helped us. We looked at the prayer life of first kings, the prayer life of Elijah and first kings.

We looked at the planning of Ezra and Nehemiah, the providence of Esther. We glanced at Job. Job's an amazing character. He loses everything in 32 verses and he spends over 40 chapters trying to understand why.

We considered everyone's favorite psalm. I think that was the best study. Some of the psalms were so personal and so precious to the people in the congregation that we used it at their funeral.

[20 : 14] We also dived into Ecclesiastes to learn about that life is vanity without God. We skimmed through the Song of Solomon. I've only preached one sermon on it. We dipped in and out of Isaiah and many of the other major prophets, but we stopped to learn more about the minor prophets of Jonah and Obadiah and Nahum and Haggai and Zechariah.

Then whenever we crossed over into the New Testament, we learned how to live as a Christian from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We learned how to pray in the Lord's Prayer.

We followed the life and ministry of Jesus by studying Mark and John's Gospel. We discovered that the disciples of Jesus, they were only 12 ordinary men whom Jesus called to follow Him.

We listened to all the seven sayings of the suffering Savior on the cross who died for sinners such as you and I. We witnessed the beginning of the birth of the church of Jesus in the book of Acts.

We gleaned some of the theology from the letter of Romans. We learned from the folly of the Galatians in that letter too. We also looked at Paul's letters to the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians.

[21 : 22] We studied the pastoral epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. We noted that Jesus is better in the letter to the Hebrews. Faith is important in the letter of James and perseverance is key in 1 and 2 Peter.

We touched on 1 John that we all need to have assurance of salvation. We all need to know that we're a Christian following Jesus. And when we came to the end of our Bible in the book of Revelation, we were taught never to look inward but always to look upward and to keep our eyes firmly fixed upon Jesus.

You know, over the past 10 years, we've not just studied bits and books of the Bible. We've covered a lot of ground. But you know, in it all, we found the framework.

We found the focus of the Bible. that the God we worship is a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping God. He makes promises and He keeps every one of His promises.

And He does it all because of His name, for His name's sake. And we studied even the names of God in the Bible from Jehovah Jireh, the Lord is my provider, to Jehovah Sidkenu, the Lord our righteousness.

[22 : 35] And we looked at the names of God. Why? Because there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved other than the name of Jesus.

We also studied the Holy Spirit who's the neglected person of the Trinity and yet the needed person in the Trinity. He's needed in creation. He's needed in salvation.

We learned how to love our church. And by loving our church, we love our community and the people in our community. And we learned that all the teaching of the Bible, it's based upon the teaching of Jesus handed down to the apostles.

That's why we learned to confess the apostles' creed. I'm sure you remember it well. But we're not only an apostolic church. We discovered that we're a reformed church because we love the fact that our salvation is based upon sola scriptura, scripture alone.

Our salvation is by sola gratia, grace alone. It's through sola fide, faith alone. It's in sola Christos, Christ alone. And all of it, all that we're doing is solideo gloria, to the glory of God alone.

[23 : 48] But we're not only an apostolic church and a reformed church, we're also Calvinists. And we love being Calvinists. We love the fact that our Bible teaches us about total depravity and unconditional election and limited atonement and irresistible grace and also the perseverance of the saints that we are to keep going.

Despite all that we face in life, we are to keep going, looking to Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith. But you know, we're not just an apostolic church and a reformed church and Calvinists.

we're all pilgrims. And I would have to say that's the best study I ever did with you. And yet it was all during lockdown, looking into a camera.

The pilgrims were all part of the pilgrims' progress as we journey with Christ, fleeing the city of destruction and looking forward to the celestial city.

Therefore, says Paul, therefore, verse 26, 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.

[25 : 10] 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.

You know, Paul's farewell exhortation, it's powerful, but it's also pointed. It's pointed because he says to these shepherds that he loves so dearly, that he has spoken to so often.

He says to them, I have preached the whole counsel of God to you. Therefore, your blood is no longer on my hands.

He's very solemn in what he says. I have preached the whole counsel of God to you. Therefore, your blood is no longer on my hands.

And you know, Paul, he's reminding both preacher and hearer that on the day of judgment, when all is revealed and all is put out in the open, on the day of judgment, the preacher will be held accountable for every sermon he has preached, but also the hearer.

[26 : 24] You, as the hearer, will be held accountable for all that you have heard. Which really raises the question, doesn't it? It really raises the question, what have you done with all that you have heard?

what have you done with all that you have heard? And you know, although I didn't count, I estimated that I have preached over 1,200 sermons in Barvis during the last 10 years.

That's a lot of hours you've had to listen to me. And yet Paul says, I testify to you this day, I am innocent of the blood of all.

I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. It's a farewell exhortation. And so in a final farewell, Paul gives to the Ephesians these shepherds.

He gives a farewell explanation, a farewell exhortation, and then lastly, and briefly, a farewell encouragement. A farewell encouragement. Look at verse 32.

[27 : 42] 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.

And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace. You know, after warning the elders to keep watch over the flock of God and to keep alert and to keep awake to the dangers and the division of the church, all Paul can say to these shepherds, all he can say to them is, as it is there in verse 32, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace.

I commend you to God and the word of His grace. And you know, I love what Paul says there. The word commend, boys and girls, the word commend, it literally means to entrust into someone's care.

It means to place them into their hands, to hand it over. I commend them. I entrust them into your care.

And that's what Paul is saying to the Ephesians. He's saying, I am entrusting you as a congregation into God's care and God's keeping. I am entrusting you into God's care and God's keeping.

[29 : 03] And you know, thinking about Paul as a pastor, he knew that he wasn't going to see the young ones in the congregation growing up and going to Sunday school.

He knew that he wasn't going to watch and witness people, the people he had preached to for years, coming to faith in Jesus Christ. And he knew that he wasn't going to be around when there were those who loved the Lord and finally fell asleep in Jesus.

He knew he wasn't going to be there, which is why he entrusts them into God's care and God's keeping. He knows that he's not going to be there, but he entrusts all these shepherds into the hands of the God who will be.

Because his grace is always sufficient. And you know, that's all I can do too. All these young lives that we see in our congregation, I'm not going to see them growing up, but I entrust them into God's care and God's keeping.

My unconverted friend, how I've looked at you unlovingly, as best as I could, preached to you. And I long to see the day, but I won't see it.

[30 : 20] I won't be here to see it. But I long for the day you phone me and you say to me that I'm your Christian friend. And my Christian friend, although I won't be around when you fall asleep in Jesus, the best part is, the best is yet to come.

And you know, all I can do as a pastor, as an under-shepherd, is entrust you into God's care and God's keeping.

Because as we were saying this morning, well, what better hands to be in than the hands of the God who promises to keep our going out and our coming in from this time forth and even forevermore.

forevermore. And you know, it's true. The hardest word to say is goodbye. No one likes goodbyes.

We really don't. But I'm thankful tonight that I learned what the word goodbye means. God be with you. God be with you.

[31 : 36] And like Paul, I can now leave Barvis. Confident that I'm entrusting you into the gracious hands of the God who will keep you and present you faultless before his glory with exceeding joy.

I can leave Barvis confident that you are in better hands. The hands of a God who loves and who cares and who provides for you.

Well, may the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. Our Father in heaven, we give thanks this evening that thy word is so real and it is so relevant that we can look at the experience of another servant of the Lord and learn there of the heartache that he went through leaving his congregation and his people.

And we thank you, Lord, that we can learn from the experience of others and even see ourselves on the pages of Scripture. But Lord, our prayer is that we would see Jesus ultimately in Scripture, that we would see him presented to us in the Gospel as the whole counsel of God is proclaimed, that we would see none other save Jesus only.

Bless thy truth to us, we pray. Bless thy word to our souls and always lead us to the rock that is higher than us. Go before us and we pray. Take away our iniquities.

[33 : 06] Receive us graciously for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, we're going to bring our service to a conclusion this evening. We're going to sing the words of Psalm 138.

Psalm 138 in the Scottish Psalter, page 431. Psalm 138, page 431.

We're singing from verse 5 down to the end of the psalm. But before we sing, I better not forget, we have questions. So you all got the headings, yeah?

No problem. Good. Okay, question one. What does the word goodbye mean? Say it again? God be with you.

Good job. Okay. Question two. What kind of people were the Ephesians? Shearos. So they were just like you. Shearos. Okay? Complete the sentence.

[34 : 16] Paul preached the whole counsel of God. Well done, Rachel. Okay? And what does the word commend mean? Entrust to God.

Yep. So I commend you to God. I entrust you to God. Wonderful words. Aren't they? So we're going to sing Psalm 138. You'll get your chocolate at the door.

You didn't get your thank you chocolate this morning, some of you. So I think there might be some left unless the church officers ate them. So you can have them in a minute. So Psalm 138, we're singing from verse 5 down to the end of the psalm.

Yea, in the righteous ways of God, with gladness they shall sing, for great's the glory of the Lord who doth forever reign. And we'll sing on to the end of the psalm. And it was verse 8.

It was actually Alison. I'll point out Alison. Alison highlighted this psalm to me. It's a great psalm. Surely that which concerneth me the Lord will perfect make. Lord, still thy mercy lasts.

[35 : 22] Do not thine own hands works for sake. Everything must be entrusted into the hands of God. So Psalm 138 from verse 5 down to the end of the psalm.

We'll stand to sing if you're able to God's praise. Yea, in the righteous ways of God, with gladness they shall sing, for great's the glory of the Lord to know forever rest.

Though God be high, yet He respects all those that lowly be, whereas the proud and love He wants far off know with He.

Though I in midst of travel walk I lie from Thee shall have hence my force wrath and stretch thine hand thy right hand shall me save surely surely that which concern me the Lord will affect me Lord still thy mercy land do not thine own hands work forsake now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before His glory with exceeding joy to the only wise God our Savior be glory and majesty power and dominion forever and ever

Amen