

Leaders Let Go

Acts 20

PRAYER

Let me give a short review, and a *proposed chronology* before we begin today. Paul's 1st Missionary Journey was detailed in Acts 13 and 14. On Paul's return, a conference was held in Jerusalem to determine how to treat the Gentile converts. That was mentioned in Acts 15. Then Paul wrote a letter to the *Galatians* during or just before his 2nd Missionary journey. We read about that journey in Acts 15 to 17. Then he wrote two letters to the *Thessalonians*. And, as we read in Acts 18 and 19, Paul then began his 3rd Missionary Journey. About that time, he wrote two letters to the *Corinthians*, and one to the *Romans*. As you can see, a common history flows through the pages of these NT books.

If you would, please turn to 1 Corinthians, chapter 16. *It's the prequel to Acts 20.*

^{NAU} **1 Corinthians 16:1** Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. ² On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come. ³ When I arrive, **whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem;** ⁴ **and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me.** [We'll find out who they are in Acts 20]

⁵ But I will come to you after I go through Macedonia, for I am going through Macedonia; ⁶ and perhaps I will stay with you, or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way wherever I may go. ⁷ For I do not wish to see you now *just* in passing; for I hope to remain with you for some time, if the Lord permits. ⁸ **But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost;** ⁹ for a wide door for effective *service* [or a wide and effectual door] has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

OK. Now turn to Acts 20. We'll read the entire chapter. It has two main parts. The first concerns the city of Troas, and the other concerns Ephesus. Paul has spent the last three years in Ephesus, and he is preparing to leave, perhaps for good. What encouragement does Paul have for them? *That's what we'll learn today.*

^{NAU} **Acts 20:1** After the uproar had ceased [This is referring to the riot in Acts 19. Paul has been waiting. He was not in a rush to get out town. He doesn't want to show any fear, and he doesn't want his opponents in Ephesus to think they've

intimidated him. He waits for the tumult to die down, hoping to encourage the other believers.], Paul sent for the disciples, and when he had exhorted them and taken his leave of them, he left to go to Macedonia. ² When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, [That's the PURPOSE of his journey – to *exhort* the churches. As we see in his letters, he's reminding them of the truth of Christ, and of the great work which lies ahead of them. He strengthens their resolve and their courage. More than that, as we saw in his letter to the Corinthians, he invites these churches to *participate* in the work by giving to the church at Jerusalem. They're not distant and disinterested spectators; they're active participants in the work – that invitation to the churches is OUR invitation too.]

when he ...had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece. [In Acts 18 and 19, it said that Paul spent time in Achaia, which is the region just north of Athens and Corinth in Greece. Paul met Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth on his 2nd journey. He's gone back to visit.] ³ And there he spent **three months**; and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. [Remember, these men are carrying large sums of money with them to relieve the church in Jerusalem. Paul's presence endangers them. A lone assassin aboard the ship could kill them all and prevent the desperately needed gifts from getting to Jerusalem. Paul recognizes the danger, and he exercises discretion. He goes by land instead. Here's a list of the seven men.]

⁴ And [Paul] was accompanied by Sopater of Berea, *the son* of Pyrrhus, and by Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. ⁵ But these had gone on ahead and were waiting for US at Troas. [These same names are found at the close of Paul's letter to the Romans. From 1st Corinthians, we can surmise that they are leaders and evangelists in their own churches. They are men of renown, like Stephen and Philip before them. They were selected by their own congregations to represent them; their presence also ensures that no accusations could be made against Paul that he helped himself to the moneybag.

Consider that these men, being who they are, have other strengths that may be used to proclaim the Gospel in Galatia, and also at Pentecost in Jerusalem. Paul is eager to get to Jerusalem to attend that festival, isn't he? That's because ***Paul always has the mission on his mind*** – he's always thinking about opportunities to proclaim the Gospel, plant a church, establish new believers, and then follow-up, follow-up, follow-up. That was characteristic of Paul's leadership among the churches. **It was the example he set for them.** And it was reproduced in kind among the churches.]

Verse 6: We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread [the “we” refers to Luke and some others – the time is Passover], and [we] came to them [meaning Paul and these other men] at Troas within **five** days; and there we stayed **seven** days. ⁷ On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul *began* talking to them [That is, to this group of men he gathered from the churches on his journey, and to some from the church at Troas – probably elders and a few others], Paul *began* talking to them intending to leave the next day [Paul is holding an intensive seminar, a planning session, before he leaves], and he prolonged his message until midnight. ⁸ There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. [What’s Paul saying to them? *We don’t know*, except that he’s putting a young man, probably a teenager, to sleep ...]

⁹ And there was a young man named Eutychus [he’s not an elder – maybe he attended the local body at Troas, or maybe he travelled with Luke on the ship.] Eutychus is sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. ¹⁰ But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, “Do not be troubled, for his life is in him.” [Luke may be alluding to Elijah falling upon the widow’s son to instill life in him; *it’s an interesting image.*]

¹¹ When he had gone *back* up and had broken the bread and eaten [it’s a midnight snack], he talked with them **a long while** – until *daybreak* – and then left. ¹² They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.

¹³ **But we**, going ahead to the ship, set sail for Assos, intending from there to take Paul on board; for so he had arranged it, intending himself to go by land. [He’s either visiting local churches on the way, or else he’s avoiding further shipboard plots against his life.] ¹⁴ And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene [a day-trip away]. ¹⁵ Sailing from there, we arrived the following day opposite Chios; and the next day we crossed over to Samos; and the day following we came to Miletus. [These cities are strung along the western coast of Asia minor in modern Turkey. They sailed past Ephesus and are now 30 miles south.] ¹⁶ For Paul had decided to sail *past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.* [Why is that so important to him? Jerusalem will be filled with Jews from around the world at Pentecost, just as we saw in Acts 2. Paul didn’t want to miss an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel to the world. In fact, he has some men with him from a number of nations, each one able to speak to the crowd in their native tongue. As I said, *Paul is always thinking about the mission.*]

¹⁷ From Miletus he *sent* to Ephesus and **called to him the elders of the church**. [Paul probably realizes that if he goes into town, he'll be swamped by everyone who wants to see him, because he's been away for many months. Even so, he wants to encourage them before he leaves.] ¹⁸ And when they had come to him, he said to them, "**You yourselves know**, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how **I was with you the whole time**, [Paul then lists five ways that he set an example for them. *Consider what he's doing*. Setting an example is never an end in itself. Let me repeat that: Setting an example is never an end in itself. We don't want to show what WE can do; we want others to realize what THEY can do. We set an example so that it will be imitated. We want to *influence* others to imitate that example. Here's how Paul did that.]

1. ¹⁹ **servicing the Lord with all humility and with tears** [Paul was passionate about his faith, and passionate for others, imploring them to believe and to grow; and yet he never exalted himself. He worked humbly as if serving the Lord.]
2. **and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews**; [Paul stood up to those who opposed Christ, and was brave in the face of very real threats]
3. ²⁰ **how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable**, [As I mentioned, Paul took advantage of every opportunity to declare those things which would edify and encourage others to complete the task before them]
4. **and teaching you publicly and from house to house**, [Paul taught in the school of philosophy next to the synagogue, as we saw in Acts 18, but he also sought them out in their homes, one on one, face to face, to teach them personally]
5. ²¹ **solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ**. [Paul did not discriminate as far as who he would preach to. He preached Christ crucified to *all* men; he preached repentance from sin, and living by faith in Christ. He was *exemplary* in doing that.]

²² "And now, behold, **bound in spirit**, [meaning Paul feels compelled] **I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,** ²³ **except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.** [not just in Jerusalem, he's saying; that's just another danger spot – there are no safe havens for him now, and he has accepted the risk. *Listen carefully*.] ²⁴ "**But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.** [Notice how Paul weighs these two things in the balance: **HIS LIFE** as dear to himself, versus **THE MINISTRY** as dear to the Lord Jesus – his life has become his ministry, and his ministry has become his life. *He is fully devoted to testifying of the Gospel of Grace.*]

²⁵ "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. ²⁶ "Therefore, I testify to you **this day** that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

Paul is referring to the duty of the watchman in Ezekiel 33:6-7,

If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the Ram's horn, and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand. Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; you will hear a message from My mouth, and give them warning from Me.

Paul tells the elders what they must do in his absence:

²⁸ "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which **the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.** [Paul reminds them that their calling comes from God, not from him. He reminds them that, like him, they are *watchmen*. They have a duty to warn others. They are overseers, shepherds, and protectors of the flock.]

²⁹ "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves (!) men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. [That's a warning to them to be sure they are drawing believers to Christ, and not to themselves. And what do they have to guide them in this? *Paul's own example.*]

³¹ "**Therefore**, be on the alert, remembering – REMEMBERING – that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. ["Each one" – Paul didn't speak to faceless crowds, he spoke to individuals, *passionately*; he pleaded with them one by one].

³² "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. [Paul places them under God's care and under the word of God's grace which will build them up – which will MATURE them in Paul's absence. Paul commissions them to the work. He lets go of them so that they may mature as they take hold of the reins themselves. *He set them an example of self-sacrifice. It is time to imitate him, and to set an example for others.* Paul names one more example he set.]

³³ "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. [We see in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, that elders must not be greedy for money or personal gain. But Paul didn't just *say* it. He *demonstrated* it.] ³⁴ "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my *own* needs and to the men who were with me. ³⁵ "In everything **I showed you** – I SHOWED YOU – that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak; and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

³⁶ When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. [Prayer was not ceremonious with Paul – it was a way of life, a common practice which they shared together – lifting up their concerns to Almighty God. This would be the last time they shared that wonderful privilege with this man who had devoted his life to them in the name of Christ.] ³⁷ And they *began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him,* ³⁸ grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.

What *affection* they all had for Paul! What a heart-rending departure this is! Paul once described the Christian life as a race in which he ran **so as to win the prize** (Phil 3:14). We can certainly see that here in chapter 20. Paul is always on the move, striving to take advantage of every opportunity to proclaim the Gospel, and to prepare the people of God for the work of Christ.

He ran so as to win the prize for himself; but he also ran in such a way that others might win the prize too. That's what made him dearly loved. He lived with them, worked with them, cried with them, celebrated with them, and spurred them on to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24). Paul *mentored* them; he encouraged them to grow spiritually. Paul toots his own horn only to motivate them, to strengthen and embolden them to carry on his godly example – his *Christlike* example – so that others might be blessed in turn.

Paul wanted to be on-site, looking people in the eyes, shaking their hands, watching their progress, and helping them to grow by setting them a visible example of Christ. And so he travelled from city to city, revisiting the churches he helped establish. **He did it so that they might see and know God through Christ- in-him.** THAT was the work of Christ in which he was engaged. THAT was Paul's great delight; it was his passion and his pleasure. He begged and pleaded with them, with tears, to grow and to be courageous in their faith – to get beyond the basics and to manifest Christ for all the world to see!

Parents, do you do that for your children? Do you set them a Christlike example, and then let go of them, so they can grow by doing? Husbands and wives, do you set an example for each other? Children and singles, do you set an example for your friends? Do they see Christ in you? Do we influence others toward Christ by our example? ***Every one of us is called to maturity in Christ.*** Every one of us has an opportunity to become influential in other people's lives. But remember this:

These men didn't start out as elders. They BECAME elders. Paul was their teacher, but he was also their friend and constant companion. Like God, like Christ, Paul loved them enough not to leave them where they were at. He pushed them, and he pleaded with them, to grow in knowledge and in grace.

He taught others to lead. Why? So that the church might grow and reproduce. THAT was Paul's goal; THAT was his finish line; and these believers were his God-ordained means of achieving that goal. They were very precious in Paul's sight because they were very precious in God's sight. There's an old Jewish proverb: *save one life, save the world.* As with Abraham, **there are nations in each one of us.** Do you think of yourself that way? You *should*.

IF THE WORSHIP TEAM WOULD PLEASE COME FORWARD

We are being equipped and encouraged to proclaim the Gospel, face-to-face, in word and deed. We are provoking spiritual growth in one another. We are being raised up to become spiritual leaders. ***But every good leader must first be a good follower!*** Believers who are maturing and growing, will imitate what they see of Christ in others; ***then*** they can become an example for others to follow. It is a serious and yet a joyous duty. The writer of Hebrews summarized it this way:

NIV Heb 13:7,17-18 ⁷ Remember those who led ***you***, who spoke the word of God to ***you***; and considering the result of ***their*** conduct, ***imitate*** their faith. Obey your leaders and submit to their authority... ¹⁷ They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a ***joy***, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. ¹⁸ ***Pray for us...***

Pray for us. The elders of this church ask the same thing of you: *pray for us.* You share in the work when you pray for us. When the work of Christ becomes the burden of your hearts *through prayer*, you will begin to grow and to imitate Christ. How did Paul create an environment for spiritual growth? He prayed with others, *constantly*. He always had the mission in mind. And he was willing to set an example for others to imitate: Christ-in-him. *Let's strive to do that for one another.*

Now let's close in prayer, together.

Lord God, may this church become a house of prayer; may those who come here encounter the living God in His people; may we encourage and strengthen one another to run for the goal so as to win the prize, to begin with the end in sight as we live each day! May we become examples of Christ to one another. And may we grow in the knowledge and in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives in us.

Amen.