

Group Study Outline

Acts 20:17-38 Theme Sentence

Churches need shepherds who keep feeding them the gospel and protect them from false teachers.

Launching Question

What do you think church leaders should be doing? What advice would you give them? What advice is often given to them?
Give a little of the context before reading.

READ Acts 20:17-28

FOCUS on v17-27

What was Paul's ministry like among the Ephesians?
What did he teach?
How did he teach?
Who did he teach?
What was going to happen for him in the future? How could he deal with that?
Why was Paul "innocent" of their blood?

Thinking it through

Put yourself in the shoes of an elder trying to follow Paul's example:
Are there bits of the gospel that you might shrink from telling people? What are they? Why?
What are the threats we might face?
Are there times when you might not speak for Jesus?
Are there people who you might not want to teach?

FOCUS on v28-38

What is the command given to the elders?
How are the church described? What does this tell us?
Why is it particularly important for the elders to be alert shepherds?
Who are the wolves? (Matt 7:15?) What do wolves do?
How might this link to the call to "admonish" and to "work hard"?

What (or who!) can they rely on to do the job God has given them?
What does "God and the word of His grace" do?
How is this encouraging?

Thinking it through

Is this what you thought church leadership was about? What has surprised you? Honestly has this been your experience of church leadership?
If you are in leadership, what is the challenge to you? and what is the encouragement?
If you're not in leadership, is this the kind of leadership you want? Are you praying this for our leaders? Do you let yourself be led like this?

Acts 20:17-38



Getting into the story

Acts is the story of the initial spread of the gospel from a handful of Jews in Jerusalem to a huge multi-cultural group of people all over the world. Because Jesus is the risen and ascended Lord who has sent His Spirit to empower His followers, the message can and will reach the ends of the earth. We've seen the gospel overcome racial barriers and be made crystal clear that all types of people should become Christians and can by the sheer grace of God. Mission creates new churches. And these fledgling churches need godly leaders.

Paul's third missionary journey took in Ephesus. He spoke in the synagogue for three months but eventually left after continued unbelief. He then set up shop hiring a hall for two years where he could reason with people every day. He had a very successful ministry here (19:10). So successful that the people who made the idols in Ephesus got fed up with so many people ditching idolatry to worship Jesus! They started a riot against the Christians, after which Paul left with a multi-ethnic band of companions to go elsewhere for a while.

On his way to Jerusalem, knowing he'd never be back in this neck of the woods again, when he got to Miletus (about 30 miles away) he called the Ephesian elders to come over for his final instructions: the first ever pastors' conference!

What would he say to them? What did they need to know? Living in a city full of idols and opposition from outside, how could this little church ever survive? Let's listen in on what Paul says the church needs from its leaders...

[NB]

Acts 20:17-38 Theme Sentence

Churches need shepherds who keep feeding them the gospel and protect them from false teachers.

Application

- Elders should teach the whole truth the whole time to the whole people whatever the cost right to the end.
- Christians need this kind of leadership. It's given by God for our benefit. So encourage it. Pray for it. Be shepherded willingly!
- Be on the lookout for wolves who will tear the church apart with false teaching.
- Don't become a wolf yourself.

Commentary

- 17 Paul gathers together the leaders of the Ephesian church. Firstly note how there is more than one leader; there is a team. Secondly, a quick note about their titles. This same group of people are described as "elders" (v17), "overseers" (v28 – a word that became 'bishop') and "shepherds/pastors" ('take care of' in v28 is to 'shepherd'). Eldership is a word borrowed from Jewish contexts, overseers is a word borrowed from Greek contexts, and pastor is a word borrowed from farming! These names refer to the same group of people but they have a multi-layered task, which Paul outlines in his departing speech.
- 18 Paul is reminding them of how he behaved whilst with them, a time documented in Acts 19 which would have been over a few years. It could be that he is defending his ministry from people who are criticising him (as he has to do a lot in his letters) but more than likely he is simply laying out his life as an example for these elders to follow in his absence.
- 19 He had trouble from Gentiles too (see the riot in Ephesus in 19:23-41) but thus far in Acts most of the persecution has come from Paul's fellow Jews.
- 20-21 Notice the completeness of Paul's ministry. Despite opposition he didn't hold back from telling them the whole truth. He told it to them the whole time, whether publically or privately. He told it to everyone, whether Jews or Gentiles, something illustrated in 19:10 where we find that "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." The content of Paul's message is repentance and faith in Jesus.
- 22-23 Quite how the Holy Spirit told Paul to go to Jerusalem or that suffering awaited him everywhere, we don't know. In 21:10-11 the Holy Spirit tells Paul he'll be arrested in Jerusalem and He does so by a Christian prophet, but that's the only clue we get. However it happened, the same Spirit who informs Paul he will suffer is the same one who propels him onwards despite that suffering.
- 24 Paul's priority is not survival but completing the ministry given to Him by Jesus – to testify to the gospel of God's grace.
- 25-27 He isn't going to see any of them again (a fact which upsets them all – v38) but he is content that his ministry among them is complete. Here Paul seems to be referencing Ezekiel 33:1-9, in which God makes Ezekiel Israel's watchman. If God is planning to kill someone, Ezekiel tells them & they don't repent, they are to blame; but if God is planning to kill someone, Ezekiel *doesn't* tell them & they don't repent, they still die but Ezekiel is to blame. Paul sees himself like this, and since he has given a full account of God's message it won't be his fault if any of them perish. This is very sobering – implying that if he *had* held back something of God's plan then he *would* be responsible for their falling away.
- 28 This is the main application point for Paul – pay careful attention! To what? To themselves. And to the flock. They mustn't neglect their own walk with the Lord (as we'll see in v30) if they are to be of use to the church. The congregation are described as a flock. They belong to God and He bought them with Jesus' blood. The pastors are to realise how precious the flock is to God and care for them accordingly. As mentioned before, to "care for" means to "shepherd", which implies feeding, nurturing, leading, etc. It should comfort the flock to know that they belong to the Father, have been bought by the Son and have been given their leaders by the Spirit.
- 29-30 The imperative to shepherd the flock watchfully is heightened by the threat of fierce wolves. Wolves were the biggest enemy for shepherds, tearing sheep to shreds. Here the wolves will be people who twist the truth and teach wrongly (see Ezekiel 22:25-28; Matthew 7:15). They do it to gather people not around Jesus but around themselves. And the real worry is that Paul says that they would arise men "from among your own selves". These would be seeming Christians. They might even be elders in the room at that moment. They *really* need to watch themselves and the flock!
- 31 Being alert to this danger will involve following Paul's pattern of admonishing (warning/rebuking) anybody whenever it's needed. It should be done with tears and a heavy heart but it should be done nonetheless.
- 32 The task seems almost unmanageable. But Paul commends them to God and the word of His grace, the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is that which will build people up. It is that which will make sure that people are there in the end with the holy people of God, His protected flock. Being watchful is about sticking to the good news of God's grace to us in Jesus. The role of elders is to teach it, teach it, teach it, teach it, teach it all the time and to everyone.
- 33-35 It seems somewhat random to suddenly talk about money here, but presumably this is part of being a good shepherd and not a wolf. Paul's example is of working hard to cover his expenses and those of his companions rather than fleecing (!) the church. In 1 Cor 9:3-18 Paul explains why ministers have the right to be paid for their ministry but why he forfeited that right for the sake of the people. Hard work is the way to help the weak (shepherd the flock). Interestingly, these words of Jesus are found nowhere else, but show there is blessing in pouring yourself out for others.
- 36-38 They have a deep and loving relationship. Paul has to leave in order to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. But he leaves this newly formed church behind to continue the mission in that part of the world. Ministry in the church looks like elders being watchful shepherds over their flock, teaching the whole truth the whole time to the whole people, and protecting the sheep from false teaching wolves.
- 1 & 2 Timothy show that years later the Ephesians were still struggling with false teachers. Paul's command is still to rebuke them and keep on teaching the truth, knowing that the word of God is sufficient (2 Timothy 3).