

You Know How I Lived Among You

- Acts 20:17-21
- The rest of this chapter is so important in so many ways that I just could not rush through it. So we are going to spend at least two weeks, and probably three on this visit Paul made to Miletus on his way to Jerusalem. We are going to look at this meeting Paul had with the elders of the Ephesian church, and I believe it is important for all of us, whether you are an elder, or aspire to be an elder, or simply want to be better equipped to PRAY for and support the work of the elders.
- There are three things to notice about this visit before we get into the text itself. First, Paul sails right past Ephesus because he is in a hurry to get to Jerusalem for Pentecost. But when they stop in Miletus, he calls for the elders. Paul had spent three years in Ephesus and he loved the people there, and perhaps he knew that if he were to stop there it would be hard to leave. But he had set his face like flint to go to Jerusalem, just like Jesus had twenty years earlier, and he knew that persecution awaited him there. Just like Jesus. So what does he do since he cannot meet with the church? He meets with the elders. Paul knew that as the elders go (or grow), so goes the church. Alistair Begg likes to reference a study that was done in the UK many years ago where the health of various churches was studied. Very quickly the team doing the study got to the issue of church leadership as being a determining factor. They wrote, "Conditions vary from parish to parish, the determining factor being, apparently, the personality of the incumbent. More particularly is this the case in villages, where a spiritual leader can often make an astonishing differences." A lot has changed since then, but the strategic necessity of leadership hasn't changed. Paul knew that. We know that. It's true on a sports team. It's true with an orchestra or in a band. It's true in a congress or in a state house. It is most certainly true in the local church, and I would venture to say that most of the time when a church disintegrates into chaos and confusion, you can trace it back to defective leadership. Paul knew the effectiveness of the church in Ephesus going forward in large part lay on the shoulders of the leaders.
- That's why he met with the elders. He also knew that if he met with the elders, he was in essence meeting with the church. These were the men who led the church and any message from Paul to the elders would be a message from Paul to the church.
- Second, I want you to see that in this passage the leaders are called elders in verse 17, overseers in verse 28, and when Paul tells them to "care for the church" in verse 28, the word he uses is the word from which we get shepherd or pastor. Elders, shepherds, pastors all refer to the same people, men who are called to lead, feed, and care for the spiritual needs of the church.
- Third, it is clear from this passage that he is meeting with a team of leaders, not a solo pastor. There is no biblical support for a solo pastor, whom John Stott calls a "one-man-band, playing all the instruments of the orchestra himself." There is also no biblical support for a CEO pastor who sits atop the organizational chart. Paul met with the elders who had shared responsibility for the church in Ephesus. Remember Acts 14:23 that tells us that Paul and Barnabas went back through all the churches they had planted in the first journey and they appointed elders, plural, for every church, singular. If there is a singular reason why a church will be healthy and productive in every biblical sense of that word, I believe that reason is that the church is led by a team of godly elders. Of course there are other reasons why a church is or is not healthy. My top three would be, number one, a commitment to a plurality of godly elders; number two, a commitment to expository preaching; and number three, a commitment to equipping men to be spiritual leaders in their homes. I think if you take any one of those three legs of the stool away, the church suffers. It might grow and even have big numbers because of its programs or a charismatic topical speaker, but the spiritual growth of the members will be affected if those three commitments are missing.
- Paul is going to give a talk to the elders now, and it is the only time in the book of Acts that a speech is given to a Christian audience. We are going to divide it like Paul did into three sections.

And we will just look at the first section today. Paul will talk about his time with them in Ephesus, then his plans to finish his course, and then a final warning and admonition about the church in Ephesus. Let's look today at what Paul said about his three-year ministry in Ephesus. It was marked by transparency, tested in humble service, and grounded in the Word.

- **Marked by Transparency**

- It's how Paul opened this speech to the elders, by appealing to his own transparency as a leader. "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day..." (vs. 18) Then he says in verse 20 that he did not shrink from declaring anything that was profitable to them. In other words, he said, you know how I lived. And you know what I said. Do you see? Paul is saying, you folks know me. I didn't hide anything. My life is an open book. He says the same thing when he wrote to the church in Corinth, in 2 Corinthians 4:2, "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." Transparency in leadership is essential because the nature of preaching and teaching is that the Spirit of God brings the Word of God to bear on every man's conscience, in a way that uncovers them. But the work of God will be undermined if the one who is preaching or teaching is not transparent in his own life! Paul would not have been the guy who sold his house to the unsuspecting buyer, telling them that everything was in great shape and then as soon as they buyer had the first rainstorm the roof leaked in sixteen places. Paul says there is too much of that going on, and you know me, I have been with you for three years and you know how I live and what I have said. He told Timothy later, watch your life and watch your doctrine. Narrow the gap between what you teach and how you live. Be the same man on Monday that you are on Sunday. Be a man or woman who is marked by transparency.

- **Tested in Humble Service**

- Paul says in verse 19 that they know he had lived among them as one who was "serving the Lord."
- Serving the Lord. We throw that phrase around so much that it can lose its meaning. What does it mean to be a servant? It speaks of lowliness. Deference. Submission. Obedience. Being teachable. A servant doesn't his own agenda. He serves the one who has the agenda. Paul was a servant. Who was he serving? The Lord. Not a lord. THE Lord. I have noticed that when I am texting someone on my iPhone and I type Praise the Lord, the iPhone automatically capitalizes The. The Lord. What comes to mind when you think of The Lord? Authority. Sovereignty. Power. Might. Control. Now if you have a leader who is a servant, and that leader is serving the Lord, submitted to the power and dominion and authority of the Living God, then you have a great start on your journey. So, how did Paul say he was serving the Lord?
- With all humility. A preacher once told of his church taking out the towel dispensers from their bathrooms and installing electric dryers in their place. He said that someone had taped a note on one of the dryers that said, "Please press this button for a short recorded message from our pastor." Or maybe you heard about the Pastor who had a great message on humility...but was waiting for a bigger congregation to preach it to! NO! Paul says he was serving the Lord with all humility, or with all lowliness. Godly leaders are those who daily surrender their rights to God. He is the potter, they are simply the clay in His hands to do with whatever He pleases. Humility looks a lot like love: it is patient and kind, it does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.
- With tears. I have cried many tears of joy at Antioch in 27 years. I am sure Paul cried many tears of joy in Ephesus as he saw people respond to the Gospel. But the tears he refers to here are tears that come from pain and frustration and loss. There's a lot of tears in leadership because there's a lot of heartache. Disappointment. Promises not kept. Friends leaving the church. False accusations. Struggling marriages. Men and women and children going AWOL in their faith. When those things happen, we serve the Lord with tears. We must! I will confess to you that one of the

things I struggle against in my flesh is cynicism, or developing a hardness of heart. Would you pray for me and the other elders that God would keep our hearts tender? There has to be a certain thickness of skin in leadership, but we don't want that to ever develop around our hearts.

- With trials. We know many of the trials that Paul has already suffered through because of our studies in the book of Acts. Why would he bring this up to the elders of the church at Ephesus? Because they are going to go through trials themselves. And I believe this to be a faithful saying, that every church will go through trials. Look ahead to see what Paul says is going to happen in Ephesus: **Acts 20:29-30**. Every church will see savage wolves come in from without who will try to destroy the flock. Every church will have false teachers rise up from within who try to draw disciples to themselves and to their teaching. In other words, in the church at Ephesus some of the elders will become the enemies of the truth. Jesus said to His own disciples, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." And that's part of serving the Lord. Dealing with the trials, being alert to the dangers, faithfully leading through storms of controversy. What have we seen so far? Paul's leadership was marked by transparency, tested in humble service, and...
- **Grounded in the Word**
- Paul says that he did not shrink from declaring to the church anything that was profitable (vs. 20). Then later in verse 27, he says it again, that he did not shrink from declaring to the church the whole counsel of God. An elder or a pastor cannot pick and choose what he wants to teach from the Bible. This is why a steady diet of topical preaching at best does not promote healthy Christianity, and at worst brings disease and decay to the soul. It is the elders' job to declare the whole counsel of God. And to declare to the church everything and anything that is profitable. (May I suggest we all use that as a guideline to what we post on Facebook or Twitter? Is it true, first of all? And is it profitable?)
- Declaring and teaching (vs 20) are two different words and point to two different ministries. The word for declaring means to announce, or to proclaim or to herald. The word for teaching is different and it takes the word proclaimed or declared and methodically explains it. This is one way of understanding the difference between preaching and teaching, but in many good sermons there will explanation and methodical teaching, and in many good teachings there will be declaration. It is interesting that Paul said he declared, or preached, in public, and he taught from house to house. That's our Sunday morning service and our Wednesday night home groups. Sunday morning is mainly about declaration of the Word, with a call to respond and apply it. Wednesday night is mainly an explanation of the text, with an emphasis on body life and living and loving together as brothers and sisters, under the authority of God's Word.
- How about us? Each of us? Can we say that our ministry is marked by transparency, tested in humble service, and grounded in the Word? By God's grace, it can be.