

5. From Troas, Paul's companions set sail for Assos with Paul following them on foot. The team reunited once again at Assos, where they boarded a ship for Mitylene. Sailing south along the Asian coast, the men continued on from Mitylene to Miletus, passing by the island of Chios and Ephesus on the mainland to the east (20:13-15).

Paul had made the painful decision to not stop in Ephesus because he was determined to try to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost (probably not many weeks off by that time). Paul was eager and resolute in setting his face toward Jerusalem, but even so it was a hard decision to sail away without visiting the Ephesian saints. He had spent more time in Ephesus than anywhere else in his ministry travels and was deeply attached to the believers there. Paul was convinced that stopping in Ephesus would delay his trip beyond what he could afford if he was going to meet his goal of arriving at Jerusalem by Pentecost. At the same time, he was equally sure that he would never return to that area again and couldn't bear the thought of leaving without seeing his Ephesian brethren.

Stopping in Ephesus was out of the question, but Paul felt he could at least take the time to meet with the elders of the Ephesian church while he and his companions were waiting to depart from Miletus. And so, when they arrived in Miletus he sent for the Ephesian elders with the request that they come to him there (20:17). (Luke provided no logistical information, but Miletus was less than fifty miles down the coast from Ephesus, allowing the elders to sail there in relatively little time.)

Luke's record of Paul's meeting with the Ephesian elders is significant on several fronts. First of all, it is the only speech in the book of Acts that is addressed to a Christian audience. More specifically, it provides unique insight into Paul's apostolic instruction of early Church leadership. There are other instances of such instruction in his epistles – and particularly the Pastoral Epistles, but none which has the immediacy and intensity of this occasion. The reason for this is evident in a third observation, namely the fact that Paul's words to the Ephesian elders reflected his conviction that he would not see them again (20:25). Believing that this was to be his final opportunity to instruct and exhort these men, Paul was very careful to use his time and words wisely.

Thus this discourse provides a concise summary of what Paul considered to be of first importance and greatest consequence respecting the oversight of the Church in the cause of its ongoing growth, security and well-being.

- a. Paul began his message by reminding the Ephesian elders of his own ministry among them. Verses 18-21 comprise one extended statement flowing out of the kernel clause, "You yourselves know." By it Paul reasserted his integrity and credibility as Christ's apostle. But more than that, he set himself before them as an example to be followed: Being a good shepherd of Christ's sheep means following Paul – not as a human exemplar, but as he pointed to Jesus. These elders were to follow him *as he followed Christ*, in that way showing themselves to be Jesus' disciples and imitators of God, not the man Paul (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:1 with Ephesians 5:1-2; cf. also 2 Corinthians 4:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-9; Hebrews 6:1-12, 11:1-40 with 12:1-3; 1 Peter 2:11-25).

And what Paul's ministry provided to the Ephesians was an example of what it looks like to serve the Lord – first as a matter of attitude and conviction, and only then as those inward issues manifest themselves in outward conduct. The glorified Christ had revealed Himself to Paul and commissioned him to take His gospel to the Gentiles as well as the sons of Israel (9:15). Paul grasped the outcome and import of Jesus' coming and he carried that message into the world with urgency and passion. He “*served the Lord with humility and tears,*” boldly declaring to Jew and Gentile alike the gospel of “*repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,*” fully aware that that proclamation would bring upon him persecution, trial and suffering (20:19-21). Jesus had told him that this was the cost of his apostleship, and Paul soon learned it firsthand (cf. 9:16, 19-25).

- b. Paul's labors in Ephesus had been his service to Christ and His gospel, whether in the synagogue, among the pagan Gentile populace, or within the fledgling community of believers. Motivated by love and genuine concern for men, he had never held back anything of the truth, and in the Ephesian church this faithfulness amounted to instructing and exhorting the saints day-to-day and house-to-house in all things that were profitable to their faith and nurture in Christ.

Paul hadn't shrunk back in Ephesus, despite the fact that his ministry had incited virtual anarchy in the city at great peril to himself. At the hand of the Gentiles as well as his Jewish countrymen, Paul had indeed experienced “danger in the city” (2 Corinthians 11:26), and yet continued on unintimidated. The elders listening to him knew firsthand the truth of the things he was claiming – they had observed his ministry and its perilous consequences for three years – and they had every reason to believe him when he declared that it would be no different in Jerusalem.

Paul admitted to them that he didn't know precisely what he was going to experience there, but in general terms he had absolutely no doubt about what awaited him. His uniform experience over many years had taught him what comes to those who serve Christ faithfully and unashamedly in His gospel, and Paul's experiences were themselves the fulfillment of Jesus' declaration that he would suffer greatly in His service (9:1-16). Beyond that, the Spirit continually pressed upon his mind the sober truth that bonds and afflictions awaited him (20:22-23).

Paul was fully aware that going to Jerusalem meant entering the lion's den. The Jews had attempted to murder him the first time he went there proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah (9:28-29); could it possibly be different now, especially since the intervening years had only enlarged his notorious reputation and intensified his countrymen's zeal to stamp out this Way and its followers? Paul was going to Jerusalem with his eyes open, and yet without any fear or personal concern. Suffering had been his constant companion as Jesus predicted; walking in his Master's steps, Paul endured His affliction and anguish, but as a matter of joy and privilege (John 15:18ff; Philippians 3:7-11). Death itself was of no consequence; Paul's one concern was to finish the work entrusted to him (20:24); if Jesus, then, was going to give him over to death, that meant his service was complete.

Paul wasn't certain that he wouldn't meet his end in Jerusalem, but he had the sense that the Lord's purpose for him included ministry in Rome (cf. 19:21; Romans 1:1-15, 15:22ff). Jesus Himself would later certify that impression in an appearance to Paul in Jerusalem (23:9-11), but now, at Miletus, the only thing Paul knew for certain was that he was indeed going to Jerusalem and that bonds and affliction awaited him there. Whether or not death would come to him in that place, it was coming. But Paul would meet it with exceeding joy, having finished his course and now at last entering forever into his Lord's presence and glory.

- c. Jesus had ordained great suffering for Paul, but not as an isolated, unique decree pertaining only to him. Paul suffered for *Jesus' namesake* (9:16), which indicates that his experience of tribulation is the property of all of the Lord's disciples.
- Contrary to what some believe, suffering for Jesus' namesake doesn't mean suffering *for His sake* or *in His name*. That is to say, it doesn't mean attaching our personal difficulties or hardships to Him, either as the subject of them or their object. So, with respect to the latter, suffering for Jesus' namesake doesn't mean adopting a martyr's mindset such that we treat our suffering as our personal offering to Him (whether or not we regard it as conditioning our standing before Him). But neither is Jesus is the subject of our suffering in the sense that He imposes it upon us directly as a matter of divine fiat. Those who regard hardship and affliction in this way tend to conceive and order their response in terms of "doing their duty" – yielding begrudgingly to a sovereign God who's free to make people suffer and whose will cannot be resisted.
 - Suffering for Jesus' sake refers to what results for those who share in His life and likeness and so bear His fragrance and testimony in the world. The tribulation that the Scripture is concerned with isn't that which comes to every person – at his own hand and the hand of others – as a consequence of life in the present world. Much less is it some exertion of arbitrary sovereignty. It is the difficulty and suffering that come naturally and inexorably to those who, by virtue of sharing in Christ's life and kingdom – the kingdom of the new creation, no longer inhabit the world as it continues to operate according to the principles and features arising from the curse. It is the tribulation that belongs to those who are aliens and strangers in this world – people who exist and function according to a new paradigm of humanness, but within a world that only knows the former paradigm which Jesus condemned and conquered. Thus it is the tribulation of *misfittedness* as much as active opposition and persecution.

When Jesus called Paul to suffer for His namesake, He was simply expressing and affirming what life holds for all who become sons of His kingdom and live authentically in light of it. *Christians can avoid what Paul endured, but only by denying the truth of who they are.* But the Scripture and the gospel refuse this denial; thus their message is that tribulation is the way of the kingdom (14:21-22).

- d. So it was with Paul: His suffering was the result of a life that authentically and openly testified of Christ and His gospel. Wherever he went, he proclaimed to all men – believer and unbeliever alike – the “*whole purpose of God,*” which is to say the entirety of God’s redemptive will and accomplishment in His Son. Paul didn’t omit or temper the aspects of the gospel that prove offensive to various groups. There was no attempt to soften the gospel’s offense to the pious Jew or reason away its foolishness to the philosophically “wise” Greek (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5). Paul understood that doing so would have made him guilty of presenting *another* gospel (Galatians 1:6-10), and such a falsification not only blasphemes God, it makes the presenter guilty of the blood of men (20:26-27).

Prior to his conversion Paul *had* been guilty of men’s blood – not primarily because of persecuting them and seeking their death, but because he sought to keep them out of the kingdom of God (cf. Matthew 23:13). As a devout Pharisee, zealous for the Law of Moses, Paul’s design wasn’t to punish Christians, but to eradicate this new Way; he intended to prevent and eliminate faith in Jesus as the Messiah. But Jesus Himself intercepted Paul’s intent, and the chief opponent of the Way was transformed into its greatest first-century advocate and ambassador.

Thus Paul could claim innocence of the blood of all men in the sense that he hadn’t proven unfaithful to the heavenly vision (ref. 26:19-20); from that fateful day he had lived as an uncompromising witness of Jesus and His gospel. Paul was innocent of the blood of all men in that he proclaimed accurately the whole counsel of God to all with whom he had to do. He was faithful with the *opportunities* afforded to him as much as with the *message* itself, so that no man could lay his condemnation at Paul’s feet; each one’s blood was on his own head.

Paul understood that “blood-guiltiness” results from any shrinking back from “declaring the whole purpose of God.” *All that is needed to incur guilt with respect to men’s condemnation is to alter, color or otherwise temper, moderate or domesticate the message of the gospel.* So multitudes through the centuries – clergy as well as laymen – have brought this guilt upon themselves, perhaps even while congratulating themselves as faithful heralds of Christ and His cross. It is better to be silent than to impugn God and His Christ in “another gospel.”

- e. Paul’s reason for calling the Ephesian elders wasn’t to rehearse his past ministry with them and inform them of what lay ahead for him. Those statements only served to introduce his main concern, which was the well-being of the Ephesian church. Toward that end, he reminded these men of his holy motives and sincere love and devotion regarding the saints at Ephesus. They had experienced first-hand his love and concern, having watched him minister day after day as Christ’s servant without expecting anything or taking anything from them. He had labored for their good in the gospel without any personal agenda or self-serving motives (ref. vv. 33-35); indeed, he had no concerns for even his own life, but only that he would run his race well, completing his ministry as he ought by laying the foundation of Christ as a wise and faithful builder (1 Corinthians 3:5-10).