

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Sunday, March 31, 2019

Acts 20:28-32 “God’s Love and Care for His Church”

Intro. The greatest institution this world has ever known is the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. During the first 3 centuries of the church, it truly changed the course of human history. Before Christ and His Church, the world was full of darkness and despair. Before Christ, human freedom was almost unheard of. Slavery was widespread. Before Christ men often cursed the day of their birth and ignorantly blessed the day of their death.

But all of that began to change when Christ came. After His resurrection He sent out His apostles into all the world. They won souls to Christ, planted churches, and a growing army of Christian soldiers spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It seemed nothing could stop that army as it marched on. Yet under the control of Satan, the world fought it time and time again, but the church just kept growing. Finally, in the fourth century, the world had the idea that if you can’t beat them, then join them. Soon Christianity was not only tolerated, but embraced as the state religion, and thus it began to be influenced by the state. Then the church became corrupt, and spiritual decline led the world into the dark ages. Over the next 1,000 years the true people of God were largely out of sight. In the churches the Word of God became increasingly ignored, and salvation by grace through faith was forgotten.

What went wrong? The people and preachers of God failed to remember and obey the words of our text today. But around the 14th & 15th centuries men of God rediscovered the Word of God and once again began to proclaim its truths. The church’s impact upon society was significant once again. Every country that was influenced by Protestant, evangelical Christianity became bastions of individual freedom and blessing. However, I’m afraid that once again the church’s influence upon our society is becoming weaker and weaker. That’s because we are being attacked by the world on the outside and false doctrine, divisions and scandals on the inside. But if we take heed to Paul’s advice in this text, we can keep God’s church from losing its influence upon society.

So what are we to do? On this our 41st Anniversary, I want us to understand several truths from our text, which if understood and followed, we will preserve the spiritual health and vitality of Swift Creek Baptist Church for years to come. First, we learn of:

I. GOD’S CONCERN FOR THE CHURCH

There is no doubt that Paul had a great love for the church of God and the people of God. But the foundation for Paul’s love for the Church is the love of God Himself. In v.28 there are several indications of God’s love and concern for His church, “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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.” What assures us of God’s love and concern for the church? First, we see that:

A. He Is the Shepherd of the Flock – In v.28 Paul mentions “the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers...” The church is compared to a flock of sheep, and God is like a Good Shepherd, who cares for His sheep. Comparing God to a shepherd, and God’s people

to His flock of sheep, was certainly not original with Paul. The Psalmist said in the 100th Psalm, v.3, “We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.” Other Scriptures express God’s love and care for His people. We all know Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd,” and then he describes God’s care of His people. Twice in John 10 Jesus said that He was the Good Shepherd (vv.11, 14). Can anyone deny that our heavenly Shepherd cares about us, His people?

God’s flock today could be made up of some 10 million local churches.¹ And so because of His love and concern for the well-being of His church:

B. He Has Appointed Undershepherds - Even though Jesus is the chief shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4), notice that the Holy Spirit has appointed pastors to be under shepherds, or overseers for His flock. In v.28 Paul told these pastors that the Holy Spirit had made them “overseers, to shepherd the church of God...” God has called and gifted certain men to shepherd or pastor His flock, for He loves and cares for His people.

There are three roles of a pastor that I would mention here. First, just as a shepherd is to lead his flock to green pastures to eat, even so a pastor is to:

1. To Feed the Flock – This is the priority of pastors. How there is a great need for more pastors who will feed God’s flock the pure Word of God. Like Paul, we should keep back nothing that is profitable (v.21) but declare “the whole counsel of God” (v.27).

2. To Oversee the Flock - In v.28 elders or pastors are called “overseers.” The pastor also has a role of giving oversight of the church and the ministries of the church. We are to oversee the well-being of the church, and each member. That is why he said in v.28, “take heed ... to all the flock...” The word translated “take heed” (*prosecho*) here also means “give attention to.” A shepherd pays attention to the well-being of his flock, and cares for his flock in time of need.

3. To Protect the Flock - In vv.29-30 Paul continues this figure of speech, saying they needed to protect the flock of God from outsiders and insiders who would seek to lead them astray. I will talk more about that in just a moment. Notice the heart of a concerned pastor that we see in v.31, where we read that Paul warned them with tears. So Paul appealed to these men to be true to their calling.

Pray for me and Drew, that we will be the kind of pastors described here. You should also appreciate your pastors, and support your pastors, for we have an important God-give role in the well-being of the church.

C. He Acquired the Church for Himself - One reason pastors should be faithful to shepherd the their flock of Christians is the fact that the flock belongs to God. “Purchased” (*peripoieomai*) is from a word which means “to acquire, obtain, gain for oneself.” The church is not owned by the pastor; the church is owned by God!

And we all care especially for what belongs us to. We care more for our children than for other people’s children. We care more for our property than other people’s property. Since this church belongs to God, we can be sure that He cares for the well-being of this church.

D. He Lays Down His Life for the Sheep - Notice the cost involved in God saving us and making us His own. God acquired His sheep “with his own blood.” Literally, it could be translated, “by means of the blood of His own one.” The original Greek implies that it was

¹ If there are 1 billion Christians with an average of 100 in each church.

through the blood of God's Son Jesus that we were added to His flock.² 1 Pet. 1:18-19 says, "knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, *like* silver or gold, ... but with the precious blood of Christ..." Thus, Jesus has clearly proven His love for His Church. Jesus said in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

Even so, leaders are good shepherds who make sacrifices for their sheep. A good pastor stays with his sheep, and doesn't leave at the first sign of trouble, or at the first offer of a better salary. A good S.S. teacher or group leader is willing to sacrifice an evening at home to minister to a hurting group member.

Also, if God loves and cares for the church, then the church ought to be dear to us. Acquiring the church cost Him dearly. Have you been showing your concern for the church by faithful attendance, faithful service, and faithful giving? When was the last time you prayed for the well-being of the church? I am so thankful for the many of you who have so clearly shown your love for this church over the years.

II. SATAN'S ENEMIES OF THE CHURCH

God, through Paul, was expressing concern for the church; for He knew that a powerful enemy was out to destroy the church. Satan would attack the church in different ways: First, there would be:

A. Outward Enemies – He said in v.29, "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." Wolves would attack the flock of God from without. Paul calls them "savage" wolves. That word literally means "heavy", and thus it carries the meaning of "imposing, impressive, weighty, strong, mighty, dangerous." Soon, the Roman government would persecute the church, beginning with the Emperor Nero. Such persecution was truly savage. They would throw Christians to the lions in the arena. Yet these wolves also include other types of opponents of the church. Some businessmen have attacked the church (19:23ff). Many in the entertainment industry are attacking the Lord Jesus and His Church. Some professors in the Universities attack the church. It doesn't matter how many doctor degrees professor big britches has, if what he is teaching is contrary to the Word of God, he is wrong, and we should not change our morals or our mission to suit him. At times it will appear that the whole world is against us, but if the majority is believing or living contrary to the Word of God, they are wrong.

Don't pay attention to the threats of the wolves of this world. God will generally choose to protect His sheep. The apostle John wrote, "greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4, KJV).

B. Inward Enemies – Paul said in v.30, "Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves." This announcement probably shocked the Ephesian elders. Surely not from among themselves would troublemakers arise! But that was exactly what Paul meant. Jesus had already warned in Mt. 7:15, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves!" The devil knows he can do more damage from within than from without. Such men would speak "perverse things." The word refers to words that are twisted, crooked; designed to mislead. The

² *Idios* "own" was used of persons in a family

Bible gives ample evidence that combating false teaching is an important part of the agenda of the church and of the ministry of Christian leaders.

Consider with me two types of inward enemies we may face:

1. Conservative Type - There some conservative wolves who are strong on some of the doctrine and morals of the Christian faith but they are weak on the greatest fundamental of all: love. Some conservatives go beyond the Word of God and demand conformity to doctrines of their own making, and they split churches, and take away “disciples” who will idolize them and share their quirks of doctrine. We read of this in I Jn. 2:18-19 and 3 Jn. 9-10. Church history is replete with other examples. There are preachers who sound pretty conservative. They will quote some Scriptures. They may have an open Bible when they speak. But too many of these men or women are not led of the Holy Spirit but are under the influence of personal ambition, love of money, power and popularity. Paul warned of such men in 2 Cor. 11:13-14, “Such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.”

2. Liberal Type - There are the intellectual wolves, who cast doubt upon the Word of God. For about a hundred years we have faced liberalism which attempts to make the Bible fit into modern ideas and trends of the world. Our spiritual ancestors had to battle for the truth of the gospel against skepticism regarding the supernatural and the trustworthiness of Scripture and an unbiblical optimism about human nature, which opened the door to a lot of other unbiblical doctrines. To liberals, if something in the Bible just won’t fit, they don’t mind saying that it is not truly inspired of God. If the world doesn’t like some of the morals in the Bible, then they will agree that morals are relative and situational. They say there are no moral absolutes.

Paul was not warning of wolves created by his own imagination. That this development did in fact take place at Ephesus is evident from the Pastoral Epistles (I Tim. 1:19f.; 4:1ff.; 2 Tim. 1:15; 2:17f.; 3:1ff.) and from the letter to the Ephesian church in Rev. 2:1ff. In fact, the Ephesian church did give heed to Paul’s warning. Years later Jesus commended them saying, “...you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.”

By the way, much of this text can apply to parents and families. Just as Satan is out to destroy the church, even so he is out to destroy the family. He is after your children. There are savage wolves in our schools and colleges. There are savage wolves in the entertainment industry. Social media and online videos are causing our children and youth to be more influenced by godless culture more than ever before. We are losing too many of our Christian kids to Satan and the world.

In light of such dangers, I’m sure the people were wondering, “What’s going to come of us?” Paul would not be there to guide them (v.25). So Paul also talks about:

III. GOD’S DEFENSE FOR THE CHURCH

Paul left them with some instructions which, if followed, would guide them safely through these perils. First, he charges us to:

A. Maintain Alertness - Paul said in v.28, “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock...” Likewise, he said in v.31, “Therefore watch...” If there are wolves without and enemies within, obviously pastors and others need to be alert to these dangers and recognize

them. Yet before Paul addresses being watchful for enemies, he first said in v.28, “Therefore take heed to yourselves....” So first:

1. Be Alert to Your Own Spiritual Condition – Paul said in v.28, “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock...” Likewise, he told Timothy in 1 Tim. 4:16, “Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine.” The biggest battle the Christian leader has is to ensure that his or her life is in order. A. W Tozer once wrote, "Do you know who gives me the most trouble? Do you know who I pray for the most in my pastoral work? Just myself."³ So keep a close eye on your own spiritual health. Just as an unhealthy body leads to a weakened immune system and more sickness, even so, if you do not maintain your spiritual health with a close walk with the Lord, you are more likely to fall victim to these “wolves.” Some who start well do not end well because they have not kept watch over themselves. Also, a preacher must take heed to himself, for he must practice what he preaches! Before I preach a message to you, I must first preach it to myself.

I want everyone, especially our leaders, to evaluate your own spiritual well-being. Are you close to the Lord right now? Are you filled with the Spirit? Are you living a holy life? We cannot lead effectively if the answer to these questions is No.

2. Be Alert to Spiritual Dangers – After warning of savage wolves, Paul said in v.31, “Therefore watch....” These days, if you are walking alone at night, you would do well to be alert to dangers that may be lurking. We must also watch out for spiritual dangers. As Paul says here, we are to have a watchful attitude toward our spiritual enemies. We can’t afford to be gullible and believe everyone on TV or the Internet just because they seem to have a successful ministry.

B. Place Yourself and Others in God’s Hands – In v.32 Paul said, “I commend you to God.” That word means “to place beside; to deposit to the care of another.” It is like a mother placing her child in the care of a loving grandparent. What a thought! Even though the Ephesian Christians were living in an evil city, without an apostle to guide them, he could leave them with remarkable confidence because he was placing them in the hands of God!

These Christians had to learn to get along without Paul. They could no longer lean on him. Now, they had to learn to lean completely on God. No man ever leans all his weight upon God’s arm until every other crutch on which he used to lean has been knocked from him. Vance Havner lost his wife, and he wrote a book about that experience. He said, “I am now shipwrecked on God, and stranded on omnipotence.”

Parents, once your children reach the age of 12 or so, you cannot and should not always be with them, to guide them, to protect them. They must learn to become independent. What you need to do as they get older is place them in the hands of God.

So whether we are entrusting our children or our church to the hands of God, we should:

1. Trust in His Power - Yes, they would face heavy, powerful, strong wolves. But when human strength fails, God is able to sustain. Romans 8:31 says, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Let this be your comfort, that you have a God to go to, a God who is all sufficient.

2. Trust in His Presence – Jesus sent His apostles out to a hostile world and said, “lo, I am with you always...” (Mt. 28:20). God can be there when others cannot.

³ A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* comp. and ed. Gerald B. Smith (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1985), 78.

3. Trust in His Providence - God has ways of providentially protecting His people. Later in Acts we will learn of a group of men who bound themselves into a plot to kill Paul. Well, it so happened that Paul's sister's son was in a position to hear of the plot. Then, when he told Paul and the Roman authorities, God providentially protected Paul with 200 footmen, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen! (23:12-22).

C. Submit to the Authority of the Word of God – Not only did Paul commend them to God, but he also said in v.32, “So now, brethren, I commend you ... to the word of His grace....” The elders were to feed the flock the Word of God, for as we have seen, wolves will try to pervert the faith of believers. God's work of keeping His children safe is done primarily through the truth of the gospel, which is now contained in the written Word, the Bible.

Argumentation: Paul gives two reasons to entrust God's people to the guidance and care of the Word of God. According to v.32, the Word of God “is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” First, it is:

1. Able to Build You Up - “Able” is from *dunameno*. We get our word “dynamite” from that word. There is power in the Word of God to make us stronger and build us up in both character and effective service (cf. Heb. 4:12). The Word of God is our spiritual food, causing us to grow and become strong in the Lord. This is so important, for the stronger you are spiritually, the less likely you will be defeated by the enemy's attacks. The Bible contains all that pertains to life and godliness (see 2 Pet. 1:3). The Bible is your light when you are in the dark and you do not know where to go. The Bible is your wisdom for the decisions of life. This Bible is your strength when you are weak. The Bible is your medicine when you are spiritually ill. We need no other guide for life, no other comfort in sorrow, no other anchor for hope, no other stay in trial and in death. I cannot always be with you, but if I have taught you the Word of God, it will always be with you to guide you, and protect you from temptation and other dangers. You just need to be sure you are learning what I and others teach, and retaining this teaching.

Furthermore, Paul says we should be entrusted to the Word of God because it is:

2. Able to Give a Heavenly Inheritance - This is true in two ways. First, it is by the Word of God that we become children of God (1 Pet. 1:23) and thus heirs of God (Rom. 8:17). Secondly, the Word of God communicates the promise of an inheritance to the saints who await it. 1 Peter 1:4 promises “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.” God cannot lie, and so His promises are sure. This inheritance is for *all* His saints, not just for a few super saints. But mind you, it is *only* for the saints, the children of God, those who have been sanctified by faith in Christ. So even if our earthly future sometimes looks dark, remember there is a bright future in heaven for the child of God. What hope the Word of God gives! Cf. Rev. 21:7.

So let us study the Word. Come to church often, so I and others can teach you. But you can feed yourself the Word of God also. In view of the lure of the secular world, and the numerous perverted interpretations of Christianity, we need to keep reading and studying the Bible on a daily and year-round basis, lest we be taken in by these enemies. But too many professing Christians rarely open their Bibles. Is it any wonder that the Church of God is so weak? Is it any wonder that worldliness is coming in like a flood? Is it any wonder that false doctrines are so readily accepted?

How much time do you really give to the Bible each day?

Conclusion: So we have seen that God has proven His love and concern for His church. He has warned of the enemies that will attack us. But we are not without defense. Let us be alert to the danger. Let us trust in the care of God. Let us learn and hold to the truths of God's Word no matter what the world says. If so, our church will be strong and healthy in the years to come!

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 3 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

ABOUT THESE SERMON NOTES

© Dr. Stephen Felker. These notes may be used and even shared for personal study or ministry, but not for commercial purposes. The author credits the sources listed above and footnotes for much of the content. The "live" recording of this sermon will be more completely in the author's own words. To obtain an audio recording of this message, you may listen free at www.sermonaudio.com/pastorFelker. Videos of a number of Dr. Felker's sermons are available at www.swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com/resources/videos. Dr. Felker's email address is S+Felker&2@aol.com (remove signs).