

Acts 20:17-38¹

Farewell Address to the Ephesian Elders ([20:17–35](#))

¹⁷From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ¹⁸When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ¹⁹I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. ²⁰You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

²²“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.

²⁵“Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. ²⁸Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

³²“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders is the third and final example in Acts of his speeches during the course of his missionary work. The first, delivered in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch ([13:16–41](#)), was given during the course of his first mission and was to a Jewish audience. The second, delivered before the Athenian Areopagus ([17:22–31](#)), was given during his second mission and was to a Gentile audience. The Miletus address was delivered in the course of his third mission and was given before a Christian gathering.

Of all Paul’s speeches in Acts, the Miletus address has the most in common with Paul’s epistles. There are many parallels both in wording and in general thought. This striking similarity may be due to the fact that this address is not a missionary sermon or a legal defense as with his other addresses in Acts. It is delivered to Christians and thus has more affinity to the epistles, which were also addressed to Christians. In form the address can be characterized as a “farewell address.” It is delivered as a conscious final legacy of the apostle to the leaders of the Asian church. Paul did not expect to return. As

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 420-429.

a farewell speech it has much in common with similar speeches in both the Old and New Testaments. Examples are Jacob's legacy to his sons in [Gen 49](#), Joshua's farewell address to Israel in [Josh 23–24](#), and Samuel's farewell to the nation in [1 Sam 12](#). New Testament examples include Jesus' words to his disciples at the last supper ([Luke 22:14–38](#); [John 13–17](#)). The most striking parallels to the Miletus speech are Paul's words to Timothy in [1 Tim 4:1–16](#) and [2 Tim 3:1–4:8](#). Certain common features characterize these addresses: the assembling of the family or followers, the note that the speaker will soon depart or die, sometimes an appeal to the personal example of the speaker, exhortations to desired behavior on the part of the hearers, and often a prediction of coming times of trial and difficulty. All of these features are present in Paul's Miletus address. Although delivered specifically to the Ephesian elders, it is a suitable legacy from the apostle for *all* his churches as he left his field of mission and challenged the church leaders to continue in his footsteps.

The Miletus address is not easy to outline. Basically the speech falls into two main portions: Paul's relationship with the Ephesians—his ministry among them, his present plans, and his future prospects (vv. [18–27](#))—and his exhortation to them for their role as church leaders (vv. [28–35](#)). The following discussion follows a fourfold division: (1) Paul's review of his past example in ministering to them (vv. [18–21](#)), (2) Paul's consideration of his future prospects (vv. [22–27](#)), (3) his warning to the elders to be on guard against future false teachings (vv. [28–31](#)), and (4) a commitment of their ministry to God and final admonition to follow his example (vv. [32–35](#)). Verse [17](#) provides an introduction to the speech, noting the assembling of the elders in response to Paul's invitation. Paul's speech follows directly.

PAUL'S PAST EXAMPLE ([20:18–21](#)).

[20:18–19](#) The opening section of Paul's address reminded the elders how Paul had conducted himself during the whole time of his ministry with them (v. [18](#)). He pointed to three basic characteristics of his ministry. First was the humility that had marked his service for the Lord (v. [19](#)). Paul's language here is reminiscent of his epistles. He often spoke of "serving" (*douleuō*) the Lord (cf. [1 Thess 1:9](#); [Col 3:24](#)) and described himself as a servant or "bond-slave" (*doulos*) of Christ (cf. [Rom 1:1](#); [Gal 1:10](#); [Phil 1:1](#)). The proper demeanor of a servant is "humility" (*tapeinophrosynē*), and Paul frequently pointed to that quality as a major hallmark of the Christian life ([Phil 2:3](#); [Col 3:12](#); [Eph 4:2](#)). It is striking that Paul reminded the Ephesian elders of his trials through the plots of the Jews. The narrative of his Ephesian ministry in Acts does not relate any specific Jewish plot against him, although such plots occur frequently in the overall story of Paul's mission—at Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth. The most recent plot was ultimately responsible for his presence at Miletus at this time, causing him to change his original plan to sail directly to Syria from Corinth ([20:3](#)).

[20:20](#) A second characteristic of Paul's ministry was the openness of his proclamation (v. [20](#)). He kept no secrets, held nothing back. Whatever was true to the gospel and helpful to the faithful, he preached both publicly and from house to house. Mention of public proclamation recalls Paul's days in the synagogue of Ephesus and the lecture hall of Tyrannus ([19:8f.](#)). The reference to houses most likely is to the house-church meetings of the Ephesian Christians. In contrast, some were not so open in their witness, i.e., false teachers who advocated hidden and secret doctrines. Paul warned the Ephesian leaders later in his speech that such would arise to plague their own church (v. [29f.](#)). He reminded them of the honesty and openness of his own preaching. When one was faithful to the truth, there was nothing to hide.

[20:21](#) The final characteristic of Paul's ministry was the inclusiveness of his witness. He had preached to everyone, both Jews and Greeks (v. [21](#)). No one had been left out. This had indeed been the case in Ephesus ([19:10](#)). Paul saw his own special calling as being the apostle to the Gentiles, but he never abandoned the synagogue. Perhaps more clearly than anyone else in the church of his day, Paul saw the full implications of his monotheism. God is the God of all. In Christ he reaches out for the

salvation of all who will trust in him. There is no distinction (cf. [Rom 3:29f.](#)). There is no room for exclusivism in the gospel in the sense that the gospel is for Gentiles and Jews, slaves and free, and men and women. The gospel itself is, however, exclusive in its claims, “for there is no other name under heaven ... by which we must be saved” ([Acts 4:12](#)). Salvation is available only in the name of Jesus.

The description of the gospel could hardly be more “Pauline” than as stated in [20:21](#). It is to repent, to turn from one’s former life to God and to “believe,” to place one’s trust in Jesus.

Commentators sometimes remark that Paul appears to have been on the defensive in his Miletus address. Such was not the case. Paul was not defending his ministry. He was presenting it as an example for the Ephesian leaders to emulate. It is a worthy example for every servant of the Lord: a ministry marked by humility, openness, and inclusiveness and rooted in the gospel.

PAUL’S FUTURE PROSPECTS ([20:22–27](#)).

[20:22–23](#) Having reminded the Ephesian leaders of his example during his presence with them, Paul now prepared them for his absence. Paul was leaving them and was on his way to Jerusalem, not knowing what would happen to him there (v. [22](#)). He evidently had first decided to take this course while still in Ephesus (cf. [19:21](#)). He was going to Jerusalem with the collection, and he did indeed have serious misgivings about how it would be received there and was fully aware that the enterprise involved some personal risk (cf. [Rom 15:31](#)). Under the compulsion of the Spirit, Paul was going to Jerusalem. On the other hand, the Spirit was warning him that “in every city” hardships, even imprisonment, awaited him (v. [23](#)). Some of these warnings were given through other Christians and are related in the subsequent narrative (cf. [21:4](#), [11](#)). The activity of the Spirit could be seen as contradictory here. On the one hand, Paul was driven on to Jerusalem. On the other hand, he was warned of the extreme risk in going there. These messages of the Spirit were not at odds. Paul was indeed being led to Jerusalem. God had a purpose for his going there. The warnings prepared him for what awaited him in Jerusalem and assured him that whatever happened, God was in it. Paul would undergo severe trials in Jerusalem, but through them he would ultimately bear his witness in Rome, which was his own heart’s desire (cf. [19:21](#); [Rom 1:9f.](#)).

[20:24](#) In v. [24](#) Paul stated the reason he was willing to face the dangers in Jerusalem. He was ready to surrender his life for the gospel. In his epistles Paul often stated his readiness to suffer, even to die, for Christ. The description of his ministry as running a footrace is also common in his letters. The most striking parallel is with [2 Tim 4:7](#), where the phrase “finished the race” also appears. The race that Paul was running was the ministry he had received from Jesus. That ministry is described as his testimony to the “gospel of God’s grace.” Oddly, that exact phrase never occurs in the epistles of Paul. One could scarcely summarize the heart of Paul’s message better than the “good news of God’s grace.”

[20:25–27](#) Paul now gave his farewell to the Ephesian elders. They would never see his face again (v. [25](#)). Paul was on his way to Jerusalem. Danger awaited him there. Even apart from the danger, Paul had completed his work in the east and now turned to a new mission in the west (cf. [Rom 15:23f.](#)). He concluded this portion of the speech with the statement that he was innocent of the blood of all because he had proclaimed the full will of God (v. [26f.](#)). Here he seems to draw from the “watchman” analogy of [Ezek 33:1–6](#). The watchman fulfills his task when he blows the warning trumpet in the face of danger. Once he has sounded his warning, he is no longer responsible for the lives of those he is appointed to warn. Paul had preached the full gospel, the whole will of God. He had called people to repentance. Now the responsibility rested with them. Again this remark is not to be seen so much as Paul’s defense of himself as an example to the Ephesian leaders. They were to do what Paul had done before them, herald the gospel and call to repentance. This is the task of a Christian witness, to proclaim the full will of God. Witnesses can do no more. The response is not theirs but the hearer’s responsibility.

PAUL'S WARNING OF FUTURE HERESIES ([20:28–31](#)).

[20:28–31](#) The third section of Paul's address exhorts the Ephesian leaders to be vigilant shepherds over the flock of God, warning of savage wolves who would arise in the future to prey upon it. The clear function of v. [28](#) in this appeal is to give a basic charge to the elders to be watchful overseers of their charge. It is important to notice, however, that Paul's first exhortation to the elders called for them to "guard themselves."

A number of details in v. [28](#) make it perhaps the most discussed part of the entire speech. The first of these has to do with the role of the Holy Spirit, who is described as having "made" or "placed" them as leaders over the flock. The question arises about the manner of appointment. As noted previously (n. 78), Paul may have appointed the first elders himself; but this responsibility soon would have gone over to the congregation if this was indeed not the case from the first. How would the Holy Spirit's activity fit into such a pattern? Most likely the reference here indicates that church office was viewed more functionally than formally. Those who were recognized by the congregation as having been gifted by the Spirit for a particular role were selected for that responsibility (cf. [Eph 4:11f.](#); also [Acts 11:22–26](#); [13:2–3](#)).

A second major issue in v. [28](#) is the meaning of the word *episkopos*, which is translated "overseer" in the NIV but which has often been translated "bishop." A monarchical bishop ruling over a number of congregations is clearly not in view. Such an organization does not seem to have developed until the second century. In the New Testament, where the term *episkopos* is used of a church office, it seems to be virtually interchangeable with the term "elder" (*presbyteros*). That would seem to be the case here, since the Ephesian leaders are denoted "elders" in v. [17](#). In this instance, however, the term may not be used to denote an office at all but rather a function—that of overseeing the flock. This would seem to be indicated by the juxtaposition of the term "shepherd" to "overseer" in v. [28](#) and by the fact that the Septuagint sometimes used the term *episkopos* for shepherds. Thus, the Ephesian leaders were not designated as bishops but rather as elders who functioned to "watch over the flock of God." This image of the leaders as shepherds of God's flock permeates all of vv. [28–30](#) and is a common biblical theme.

A final major problem in v. [28](#) is both text-critical and interpretive. It involves the final clause: "Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." The problem is the very striking statement that *God* purchased the church with his own blood. The reference is surely to the atoning blood of Jesus shed on the cross. It is quite possible to denote this as "God's blood" from the perspective of sound Trinitarian doctrine, but such an expression is really quite unlike anything else in the New Testament. A number of significant manuscripts read "church of the Lord," which removes the difficulty; but the reading "church of God" seems to be the more likely original reading. It is possible to argue that "God" is not the intended antecedent but rather Christ, "implicitly," but that is not likely. Another possibility, favored by many recent translations and commentaries, is to translate the final phrase "with the blood of his own," "his own" referring to Christ, God's own beloved Son. This is grammatically arguable and perhaps the best solution for those who find the reference to "God's own blood" unlikely for Paul or for Acts.

[20:29–31](#) The shepherd imagery is continued in vv. [29–30](#) with Paul warning the Ephesian elders of a time to come when religious predators would ravage the flock of God. They would arise both from outside and inside the church. The term "savage wolves" describes the false teachers from without (v. [29](#)). The term "wolves" often appears in the Jewish apocalyptic literature and in early Christian writings to describe false teachers and prophets. The early Christian writings appear to be influenced by Jesus'

warning against false prophets who come in sheep's clothing ([Matt 7:15](#)). That false teachers did soon arise to prey upon the Asian churches is well attested by [Eph 5:6–14](#) and [Col 2:8](#) as well as by the Letter to Ephesus in [Rev 2:2](#). The Letters to Timothy, which related to the Ephesian church, confirm Paul's prediction that some from the church's own ranks would succumb to such false doctrines and draw other Christians with them (v. [30](#)). By the second century Asia was a virtual seedbed for Christian heresy. Paul's warning was thus timely and essential. It is not by chance that this section both opens and closes with an exhortation to vigilance (vv. [28](#), [31](#)), and Paul's reference to his three-year ministry with the Ephesians was not just a reminder of his warnings but also an appeal to be faithful to the sound teachings he had brought them (cf. [20:20f.](#)).

PAUL'S BLESSING AND FINAL ADMONITION ([20:32–35](#)).

[20:32](#) The conclusion to Paul's Miletus address includes both a benediction upon the elders (v. [32](#)) and a final exhortation to follow his exemplary conduct (vv. [33–35](#)). In his benediction Paul committed the leaders to "the word of [God's] grace," i.e., to the truth of the gospel that has God's saving grace at its center (cf. v. [24](#)). The language is again strongly reminiscent of Paul's epistles. The reference to "those who are sanctified" (*hēgiasmenois*) reflects Paul's favorite designation of Christians as "the saints" (*hoi hagioi*), those who have been "sanctified," i.e., "set apart" as God's people in Christ. He likewise often spoke of the future life of the Christian in terms of sharing in an inheritance (*klēronomian*). In v. [32](#) Paul passed on the banner to the Ephesian elders to continue to lead the church after his departure, urging them above all to be faithful to his gospel in the light of the coming threats.

[20:33–35](#) There was, however, one matter of personal conduct of prime importance he had not yet treated; and he ended on this note (vv. [33–35](#)). In a real sense he ended as he had begun (vv. [18–21](#)), pointing to his own deportment in ministry as an example for them to emulate. The matter in question was the leaders' relationship to material goods. Paul's detachment from material gain is well-documented in his epistles. He never used his ministry as a "mask to cover up greed" ([2 Thess 2:5](#)). At Corinth he supported himself with his own hands ([Acts 18:2f.](#); cf. [1 Cor 4:12](#); [9:12](#), [15](#); [2 Cor 11:7](#); [12:13](#)). The same was true at Thessalonica ([1 Thess 2:9](#); [2 Thess 3:7–8](#)). Verse [34](#) would indicate that he followed the same pattern of self-support at Ephesus. In his epistles Paul exhorted his Christian readers to follow his example and work with their own hands, not being dependent on others ([1 Thess 4:11](#); [2 Thess 3:9](#)). In the Miletus speech Paul gave the additional incentive that such hard work put one in the position to help the weak. In his epistles he showed a similar concern that Christians help the weak and needy, that they share in one another's burdens (cf. [Rom 15:1](#); [1 Thess 5:14](#); [Eph 4:28](#); [Gal 6:2](#)). Greed is a universal human problem, and church leaders are not exempt (cf. the exhortation in v. [28](#) for church leaders to "watch yourselves"). That avarice among church leaders was a real problem in Asia Minor seems to be attested by the Pastoral Epistles, in which Paul insisted that a major qualification for church leaders should be their detachment from the love of money ([1 Tim 3:3](#), [8](#); [Titus 1:7](#), [11](#)). It may well be that the false teachers were particularly marked by their greed (cf. [1 Tim 6:3–10](#)).

The saying of Jesus with which Paul concluded his address should be seen in light of this context: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Paul applied this rule to the specific problem of avarice among church leaders. The minister is to be a servant, a giver and not a taker. Acquisitiveness has been the downfall for many a servant of God. This word of the Lord as applied by Paul is sound ministerial advice. The one who leads the flock of God should focus on the needs of others, be more concerned with giving than with acquiring. Paul had begun his address by listing the qualities of his own ministry as an example for the Ephesian leaders to follow. He concluded with a final quality he had sought to model. Perhaps he held it off to the end because he saw it as the most essential of all for a legitimate ministry.

Final Leave-Taking (20:36–38)

³⁶When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. ³⁷They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. ³⁸What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

20:36–38 Paul's address concluded, the apostle and the elders joined in prayer together. The prayer surely included a commitment of the elders to the Lord in their leadership of the church in Paul's absence and for Paul's safe journey and deliverance in Jerusalem. Then there was a lengthy and emotional farewell, the elders embracing and kissing the apostle. Their embracing is described literally as "falling upon his neck" in language reminiscent of the patriarchal narratives. All the Greek tenses are imperfect, which would indicate that their parting was lengthy. Their sorrow was greatest over Paul's statement that they would not see him again (v. [38](#); cf. v. [25](#)). Then they "sent him forth" (*proepempon*) to the ship. *Propempō* is used of accompanying or escorting people to their point of departure and often has the additional nuance of giving them food and provisions for their journey. That may well have been the case in this instance.

This section provides a transition between the Miletus speech and Paul's journey to Jerusalem. On the one hand, it concludes Paul's Ephesian ministry with its final farewell to the leaders of the church. For that matter it is the conclusion to his entire ministry in the east. From now on the focus would be on Rome. This section also links up with the narrative of Paul's journey to Jerusalem that follows immediately ([21:1–16](#)). The ominous tone set by the elders' concern over not seeing the apostle again would continue and even be heightened in the course of that journey.