

Exegesis of Acts 20:17-35

First lesson for Easter 4, Series C, April 25, 2010

By Rev. Paul Wenz

- I. **Background** for the pericope of Paul's meeting the Ephesian elders during his third missionary journey:
- A. Paul's 3rd missionary journey begins in Acts 18:23 through 21:17. He visits the same cities as his second journey (Acts 15:39-18:22) but in reverse order.
 - B. As he prepares to travel to Jerusalem, Paul was sailing past where Ephesus was, so he called the elders of the church there to meet him before he went on from the city of Miletus, which was 30 miles from Ephesus (Lenski, Acts, 836).
 - C. He anticipated that he would never see the elders of the church of Ephesus again (20:25), however, he did come back later (1 Tim 1:3).
 - D. What Paul tells these elders about their ministry may have become what he wrote down about the duties of elders (overseers) in the epistles of 1 Timothy and Titus years later.
- II. **Interpretation**
- A. v.17—"*...he summoned the elders of the church...*"
 - Paul had other companions with him (20:4), who probably made the 30 mile trip to Ephesus upriver and back within a day to bring the elders to him, since Paul was already in a hurry (20:16).
 - B. v.18—"*You yourselves know...*"
 - This sentence is emphatic in the Greek (υμεις), because Paul is reviewing his work among the Ephesians to the elders who would have known what he had done.
 - Paul's ministry was open to the elders for scrutiny, not for approval but as a testimony and example of a job well done (Col 3:23 – "working for the Lord, not for men").
 - Paul had been in Ephesus for 3 years so they would have known him well by then.
 - C. v.19—"*I served the Lord with great humility...*"
 - Paul sticks to the facts of his ministry—by his service (δουλευων) he had shown himself to be a "slave" (δουλος) of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1).
 - He describes his service/slavery with 3 modifiers:
 - "humble-mindedness" or "great humility" (ταπεινοφροσυνης) – with no evidence of pride, Paul had done his work for the Lord
 - "tears" (δακρυων) – surprisingly he mentions the emotional hardship of his ministry (see again in 20:31 and also 2 Cor. 2:4; Phil 3:18), not from pain but born out of love for the people (a fitting example of a true pastor!).
 - "trials"(πειρασμων) – There is little to go on concerning persecution at the hands of the Jews in Ephesus except in Acts 19:33.
 - D. v.20—"*...I did not hesitate to preach...but have taught you publicly...*"
 - These 2 verbs, "preach/declare" (αναγγειλαι) and "teach" (διδαξαι) are aorist and imply Paul's continual announcing and instructing in God's Word.
 - E. v.21—"*I have declared...that they must turn to God in repentance...*"
 - Now Paul uses the modal present participle (διαμαρτυρομενος) to say that he had been solemnly witnessing "to both Jews and Greeks."
 - Paul always kept this order of witnessing (Rom. 1:16; 2:9-10), but didn't differentiate between the two since the Gospel was for all.

- F. v.22—“...*compelled by the spirit, I am going to Jerusalem...*”
- Paul turns from past deeds to the present course and future goal of going to Jerusalem (Acts 21:17).
 - “spirit” here may mean Paul’s own spirit or conscience, or it may refer to the Holy Spirit (as in the next verse).
- G. v.23—“...*the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.*”
- By forewarning Paul, the Holy Spirit “is really binding him to go to Jerusalem, telling him of the divine will that he endure these things” (Lenski, 842).
- H. v.24—“...*if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me...*”
- Paul doesn’t consider his own life of any value in the face of his calling to spread the Gospel, but is willing to die for it (Acts 21:13; Phil 1:20-21).
 - Paul sees the goal of his life as “finishing” (ΤΕΛΕΙΩΣΩ, aorist subjunctive) the ministry Christ had given him.
 - The last phrase describes this ministry as “*testifying to the Gospel of God’s grace.*” Where some preachers may call their preaching “Gospel,” Paul defines such preaching as containing God’s grace (as opposed to the false “Gospel” preached to the Galatians in 1:6-7).
- I. v.25—“...*none of you...will ever see me again.*”
- Paul is not speaking from direct revelation, as he did in Acts 20:22 about going to Jerusalem. It is his assumption he will never see them again, yet he would (1 Tim. 1:3).
- J. v.26-7—“...*I declare to you...I am innocent of the blood of all men.*”
- The verb “declare” or “witness” is in the middle tense (μαρτυρομαι) and states literally that Paul is “*letting [the facts of his ministry] testify for him*” about the truth of his message.
 - Like Ezekiel, called to be a watchman of the city of Jerusalem in Ezek 3:18-21, Paul has preached Law and Gospel and is not responsible for the “blood,” that is the “guilt” of any who refuse the Word.
- K. v.28—“*Guard yourselves and all the flock....*”
- “Guard” or “take heed” (ΠΡΟΣΕΧΕΤΕ) is a present imperative indicating a *constant guarding*.
 - Paul reminds these “overseers” (ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΥΣ) to keep themselves clean before they try to cleanse others.
 - “*The flock*” is the image Jesus used for God’s people (John 10:11), which is from the OT image of God as Israel’s Shepherd (Psalm 23; Ezek 34).
 - As Jesus was the “Good Shepherd” (John 10), so now Paul calls the elders to “shepherd” (ΠΟΙΜΑΙΝΕΙΝ) the flock, as Jesus called Peter to do (John 21:17).
 - The term “overseers” (ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΥΣ) is the role of the pastor and is shown to be a sacred obligation by Paul’s words “the Holy Spirit made you...” pastors.
- L. v.29-30—“...*savage wolves will come...30 men will arise and distort the truth....*”
- Again (repeating opening from v. 25), Paul’s words show he is not speaking from direct revelation about the future of the Ephesian church, but simply knows men’s sinful hearts.
 - V. 30 “men will...distort,” the verb, ΔΙΕΣΤΡΑΜΜΕΝΑ, is a perfect participle, indicating “*having been and thus still being perverted*” (Lenski, 851).
- M. v.31—“...*be on guard...*”
- Paul repeats the warning to be a watchman with the command: “Watch out!” (c.f., Jesus’ command to the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane in Matt 26:41).

- Paul’s 3 year ministry among the Ephesians was marked by his unending “warning” or “admonishing” (νουθετων), which literally means “to put in mind.”
- N. v.32—“*Now I commit you to God...*”
- Paul’s admonishment is brief as he comes to the blessing. This is what he expects God to do for the elders: to protect them through “*the Word of His Grace.*”
 - The power of the Word had been a theme of Paul’s before, and of Jesus: it is the power of God to salvation (Rom 1:16); the Word that grows in good soil (hearts) Matt 13:23.
- O. v.33-34—“*...not coveted...these hands...have supplied my own needs...*”
- Paul describes his own ministry in the same way he would later qualify pastors to be “no lovers of money” (1 Tim. 3:4; Tit 1:7).
 - This does not contradict 1 Cor. 9:14 (“those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel”). Instead Paul was trying to give no excuses to the Ephesians for rejecting the Gospel by forgoing his right to receive a living from his preaching.
- P. v.35—“*...I showed you...we must help the weak...*”
- Paul’s includes a saying of Jesus that is not preserved in the Gospels.