

JOURNEYING TOWARD JERUSALEM

– **AUGUST 27. – ACTS 20:16-27. –**

ST. PAUL'S ADDRESS TO THE ELDERS OF THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS – A BRIEF REVIEW OF HIS OWN EXPERIENCES – THE KINGDOM OF GOD THE THEME OF HIS PREACHING – THE DOUBLE RESPONSIBILITY UPON ALL ELDERS – WARNING AGAINST FALSE TEACHERS – "WOLVES IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING" – DECLARING THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD.

"I commend you to God and to the Word of His grace."

– **Verse 32.**

WHEN St. Paul fled from Ephesus, after the rioting, he made a tour of the European Churches which he had founded. Passing through Macedonia to the city of Corinth, he came by vessel again to Miletus, about fifty miles south of Ephesus. He was accompanied by representatives of several of the Churches of Greece and Asia Minor, and was en route for Jerusalem, for whose poor he had suggested that collections be made in the four provinces where he had been preaching. The vessel on which the party were to go to the Jerusalem port was detained indefinitely at Miletus. Word was then sent to the Elders at Ephesus, and they came to Miletus.

Today's Study calls attention especially to the Apostle's address to these Elders. We are not to think of it as a boastful statement, but rather as a plain rehearsal of matters which his hearers would fully concede and of which he boasted nothing. It was given, not for his own sake, not as indicating personal vanity and self-praise, but with a view to quickening the memory of his hearers and making the lesson of the hour the more impressive upon them. He reminded them that for the space of three years they had known him intimately – his manner of life, his devotion to the Lord, to the service of the Truth and of the brethren. He also reminded them of his humility of mind – that his conduct had not been haughty and overbearing, that

he had not sought to lord it over the Church, but that on the contrary he had endured amongst them many trials and difficulties with the Jews, with "false brethren."

The Elders knew of his work, of his endurance and of his holding nothing back from them that would be helpful to them; they knew that he had taught them publicly and privately, as circumstances had opened to him opportunities of service. He had testified to both Jews and Greeks that there is only the one Gospel of Christ, to be accepted through faith and turning away from sin. By calling attention to these elements of his own character, he was **page 235** laying the foundation for his subsequent exhortation to them that they should copy his zeal, his fidelity. He had been a faithful overseer, or bishop, watching over their interests. He had been a faithful pastor, guiding their welfare and seeing to their nourishment in spiritual things. Knowing the truthfulness of his presentations and having the whole situation in mind, they would be the better prepared to hear from him his parting exhortation – the great lesson which he had to give them.

St. Paul informed the Elders that although possessed of his physical liberty he felt a mental restraint which he could not shake off; that he must go to Jerusalem; that this was the Lord's providence for him; and that he had received assurances from others through the "gifts of the Spirit" that bonds and imprisonment awaited him at Jerusalem. Then he added these encouraging words: "But none of these things move me; neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the Kingdom, shall see my face no more."

The Apostle had become more intimately acquainted with the Ephesian Church, apparently, than with any of the others. By the Lord's providence he had spent more time with them; and apparently

the results procured had justified his prolonged stay. Partings between friends are always grievous; and parting with no hope of seeing each other again on this side the veil is a doubly severe ordeal.

"PREACHING THE KINGDOM OF GOD"

Incidentally we note the Message which the Apostle delivered, and which he here particularly emphasizes as the Gospel of Christ – "preaching the Kingdom of God." It is right that we should recognize that this is the same Gospel which we are preaching today. If otherwise, then we are not preaching aright. The grace of God was manifested in the gift of His Son, that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man. The grace of God was further manifested in an outline of the manner in which the death of Christ was designed to bring blessings to our race:

(1) By ultimately establishing a Kingdom under the whole heavens for the rule of mankind, for the suppression of Sin and Death, for the uplifting of those who have been bound by these enemies.

(2) As a precedent to that general blessing to the world, for which we pray, "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth, as it is done in Heaven," the Divine proclamation first calls out a Little Flock to be joint-heirs with their dear Redeemer in that Kingdom.

Thank God that these precious truths respecting the grace of God and the Kingdom of God, so long covered and hidden from our sight by the traditions of the Dark Ages, are now being revealed to our eyes of understanding by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, in order that we might know the things that are freely given us of God, and that thus we might be assisted in making our calling and election sure!

No wonder the Apostle could add the forceful words, "I testify unto you this day that I am pure from the blood of all men; for I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." What he preached to the Church at Ephesus during his sojourn of nearly three years amongst them is surely the same Message which, by Divine arrangement, has come down to us in his Epistles addressed to the various Churches. We note that St. Paul's Message contained not even one word respecting eternal torment, which is no part of the Divine Plan. Surely from these Epistles we now perceive that St. Paul was very patient in reproving, instructing and encouraging the Lord's dear people! He was much used of the Lord because he had given himself so thoroughly to the Lord.

RESPONSIBILITY OF ALL ELDERS

The Apostle's thought in calling the Elders was to impress upon them the fact that, like himself, not only were they consecrated to the Lord, but, as teachers in the Church, they had a double responsibility – in respect to themselves and in respect to the Church of which the Lord had made them overseers. Notice his words, "Take heed therefore to yourselves, and to all the flock, in the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers [Greek, *episcopos* – bishops], to feed the Church of God, which He purchased with blood of His own [Son]." – Verse 28.

(1) They needed to take heed to both themselves and the flock. Whoever attempts to do shepherding in the Church will need, first of all, to watch lest he fall into temptation; for, as the Apostle declares, those who accept the position of Elders in the Church – pastors, overseers – are exposed to especial trials, especial difficulties. They need primarily to take heed to themselves lest, having preached to others, they themselves become castaways.

(2) "Those who accept the ministry, or service, of the Church as Elder Brothers under the Divine regulation should realize that they have assumed a weighty responsibility, respecting which they

must give an account to God." This does not mean fault-finding with the brethren. It does not mean merely preaching to them, nor merely visiting the sick and counseling the troubled. It means a spiritual oversight, a care of all the interests of both the congregation and the individuals composing it. Those who are overcharged with the cares of this life are not in a condition, in any sense of the word, to accept the responsibilities of this service in the Church of the living God. Only those who seek first the interests of the Lord's Kingdom and the righteousness which it inculcates are in any sense or degree properly suited to such service in the Church.

Several points in Verse 28 are worthy of careful attention. The Revised Version, quoted above, says, "In the which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops," thus agreeing with the general Scriptural statement that the Elders of the Church are NOT OVER THE CHURCH in the sense of being a superior class, or "clergy" class, but are IN THE CHURCH – members of it – overseeing members, assisting members, by the appointment of the Lord through the channel of the Church. They should consider it a part of their responsibility to notice how the other members are progressing, especially in their spiritual interests. They should feel it a part of their duty to warn, to encourage, to assist all of the other members, as opportunity may offer.

ESPECIAL DANGERS AMONGST ELDERS

It is not the prerogative of all the brethren and sisters in the Church to endeavor to set each other right, unless it be in some personal matter especially related to themselves. In such cases the advice given by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-17 should be strictly followed. An Elder, however, by his very election to his office, has been asked to take such oversight of the affairs of the congregation, to give such advice, to administer such reproofs, as the nature of the case may demand – in meekness, remembering himself also, lest he should be tempted, if not along the same lines, then possibly along

some other line of temptation. He, too, of course, should practice Matthew 18:15-17. – Galatians 6:1.

By way of impressing this duty of oversight upon the **page 236** Elders, St. Paul reminded them that the Lord had purchased this Flock with the precious blood of the Lamb of God, and that this value in the Lord's sight should be so deeply impressed upon their minds that they would be willing to lay down their lives for the brethren in any service which they could render.

Emphasizing the caution already given, the Apostle prophetically declared that there would be great need of their taking heed to themselves, because of their own selves, of the Flock itself, and especially amongst the Elders, men would arise speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Desirous of being leaders, they would not hesitate to produce a schism, or division, in the Church, in order to help along their ambition. The word rendered perverse in Verse 30 signifies, in the original, distorted, twisted. The thought is that those who begin to lose the Spirit of the Lord begin also to lose their clear appreciation of the Truth. As personal and selfish ambitions cloud their vision, they see the Scriptures more and more vaguely, and feel free to distort these so as to support their own ambitious sentiments.

How true are the Apostle's words! How great a danger there is along these lines, especially to the Elders, the overseers of the Flock! Evidently selfish ambition is one of the greatest of foes with which they must contend. Nor do these ambitions suddenly germinate, bloom and bear fruit. The process is a gradual one, and hence the more dangerous, the more deceptive, the less likely to have our notice. How important, then, it is that all of the Lord's Flock, and especially the Elders, take heed to themselves and scrutinize their conduct, and particularly the motives lying behind their deeds! Let us remember that absolute purity of the will is essential. Every

admixture of selfishness, however little, is a poisonous virus which, if unchecked, would lead to the Second Death.

"Grievous wolves" are ferocious wolves. For a time they may deceive the sheep by an outward manner and an outward profession, covering their wolfish nature. They and the outward conduct by which they deceive the Flock are Scripturally designated, "Wolves in sheep's clothing." (Matthew 7:15, 16.) The Shepherd knows their character long before it becomes manifest to the sheep. But the docile, innocent sheep are deceived until these wolves begin to bite, to devour and to scatter the Flock. The howls of anger, malice, hatred, envy and strife are noted in the Scriptures as "works of the flesh and of the Devil" – not works of righteousness, peace and love, the Spirit of the Lord. The wolf does injury with his mouth; and so do these "grievous wolves" – slandering, back-biting and doing every evil work. The Apostle warned the Elders of Ephesus what to expect, and his words were true. The same principles are still at work. The same warning still needs to be heeded. Indeed, the Scriptures imply that the severest experiences along these lines would come upon the Church in "the evil day" with which the Gospel Age would close, the time in which we now are living.

"DAY AND NIGHT WITH TEARS"

In Verse 31 the Apostle sets two points before us. First, the Elders are to watch against these evils so graphically portrayed. They are to watch for the interests of the Flock as against the wolves. They are to watch to give the wolves as little opportunity as possible to tear the Flock and to backbite them. They are to warn the sheep lest any of them, becoming inoculated with the rabies of the wolves, should display signs of hydrophobia and begin to backbite one another, with the usual symptoms of hydrophobia – with an apparent thirst for water, symbol of Truth, yet refusing to drink it – turning against it.

Second, the Elders are to watch also against those sure to arise "of your own selves." Proper watching begins with our own hearts, saying, "Lord, is it I?" And proper watching will in time discern such characters and expose them – not from any bitterness towards them, but for the protection of the Flock. – 1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 1:15; 2:17.

St. Paul reminded the brethren that such had been his own course – one of great watchfulness, interest, care, over them and over all the Churches of Asia Minor. The expression, "Night and day with tears," shows us clearly that he felt properly the weight of responsibility resting upon him as a servant of God, an ambassador of the King of kings, an over-shepherd, an overseer, of the Lord's Flock, a "minister of the New Covenant," delegated by the great Head of the Church to assist in calling out and preparing those who will be members of the glorified Body of Christ, to reign with Him a thousand years.

DIVINE ASSISTANCE PROVIDED

In the closing words of his exhortation the Apostle's thought seems to be that he desired his words, his earnest address, might not only awaken the Elders to a keen sense of their responsibilities, but might lead them to inquire as to what defenses could be depended upon for the crisis thus pointed out. He draws attention to the fact that God, the great Center of all our blessings, from whom comes every good and every perfect gift, is on our part, is on the part of all who are seeking to cooperate with His arrangements.

By way of further explanation he mentions the Scriptures, the Word of God's grace, the Gospel Message. He tells them, and us also, that the Word of God is able to build us up, to give us the necessary development of character and to give us ultimately a share in the great inheritance which God has in reservation for all those who are sanctified by this Message. Let us lay this well to heart. Neglect of God's Word, neglect of His promises, means a deficiency

of strength to bear the trial which is our portion. It means also the opening of the door for Satan to put darkness for light and light for darkness, to our confusion. Let us make no mistake. It is a question of inheritance or no inheritance, amongst them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus.

Verses 33 and 34 are a noble testimony. The Apostle had used his trade as a tent-maker not only for his own support, but for the financial assistance of those associated with him in the Gospel work. Praise God for so noble an example of devotion! Although the Apostle did not, could not, endure as much as did our Redeemer, nevertheless the illustration of a full devotion which his life affords does us all great good; for we remember that he had like passions with ourselves, as he himself declared. He was imperfect, and was obliged to keep his body under – in subjection to his new mind, the will of God in Christ. – 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

In Verse 35 he reveals the secret of his success as a servant of the Lord. He constantly remembered and put into practice the Master's words. The art of GIVING HIMSELF is one of the secrets of a happy Christian life. He first gives his will to the Lord, then his time, his energy, his talents, to the Lord's service and for the Lord's people. He has pleasure in the giving and a blessing, whether others know it or not. By and by his time will come for receiving his full reward. To such the Lord will give eternal life, eternal glory and association with Himself in His Kingdom.

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