



ACTS: ENDS OF THE EARTH ACTS 20:17-38

STUDY GUIDE
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ACTS 20:17-38 ESV

17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 18 And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, 21 testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. 22 And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 24 But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. 25 And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, 27 for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. 28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. 32 And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. 33 I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. 34 You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. 35 In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" 36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, 38 being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

STRUCTURE (credit to Dr. Patrick Schreiner)

- I. Paul summons the elders (17)
- II. Paul's ministry (18-27)
 - a. Past ministry (18-21)
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- III. Paul's admonitions and entrustment (28-35)
 - a. Admonition: Be on guard (28-31)
 - b. Entrustment: God and His Word (32-35)
 - c. Paul's example: Faithful worker (33-35)
- IV. Paul's final embrace and prayer (36-38)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Having "resolved in the Spirit" to enter Jerusalem (Acts 19:21), Paul hastens toward his destination. But his shepherd's heart tugs at him. Despite the Spirit's promptings, he can't help but make one final appeal—one final warning—to the church where he labored for three years. He calls for the elders to meet him so that he can obey both "tugs": that of the Spirit and that of the church.

When the elders arrive, Paul tees up his exhortation with what they already know: Paul has been consistent; he has been selfless; he has endured pain; he has shown courage; he has been tireless. His motivation throughout has been to finish his divinely appointed race. Every unexpected twist, hill, and valley has come from God, and Paul refuses shortcuts. He has earned their trust.

He has also shown us the model for trusting leaders. We don't trust them because of platforms, positions, or power—wolves have those too. Wolves can even traffic in supernatural power for healing, revelation, and miracles (Matt. 7:15-23). We discern wolves by their fruit; we discern true shepherds the same way. Paul's consistent, selfless, courageous, and tireless endurance is what a true shepherd looks like. This is the fruit we should look for.

After emphasizing his credibility based on their own personal experience of him, Paul shifts toward his exhortation in verses 28-35. The exhortation takes a Trinitarian shape: God the Father purchased the church through the blood of

Jesus, and the Holy Spirit made them overseers (v. 28). The church is precious to God, as evidenced by her purchase price. Just like we are careful with fine china, elders must likewise “Pay careful attention”—first, to themselves, and then to the flock. You can’t watch over God’s flock if you’re not even watching after yourself. Such diligent care results from a heart that is steeped in the love of the Trinity for His church.

It also results from heeding God’s warnings. Human hearts are wicked (Jer. 17:9), and leaders are tempted to think they have “arrived.” Paul says, no—you have a “race” to run. If you don’t sprint like you’re trying to win, you’ll be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:24-27). Worse, God’s precious church—purchased by Christ’s precious blood—will succumb to “fierce wolves” (v. 29). Worse still, some of those wolves will even arise “from among your own selves” (v. 30), which is to say, from within those very elders!

This is sobering. Wolves don’t look like wolves. They weep with the apostle on the beach. They lay hands on the sick. They preach truth—for a time. But slowly, imperceptibly, the subtle shift happens: from steward to owner, from servant to lord, from shepherd to devourer. The transformation typically occurs in inner circles and on ivory towers. Faithful shepherds can say with Paul, “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time...” They are not separate from the flock. They are with the flock. In fact, they are part of the flock. Shepherds never cease to be sheep, prone to wander. Therefore, they pay “careful attention” to themselves (v. 28); they are “alert” to dangers all around (v. 31).

Unfortunately, Paul’s prophetic warning turns to disaster for some. Many scholars believe that Hymenaeus and Alexander were among those very elders from Ephesus. These were not outsiders—they were insiders. Paul later says he “handed them over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” (1 Tim. 1:20). Inexplicably, these men—once entrusted with the care of God’s precious flock—drifted into doctrinal destruction, taking others with them.

Paul’s closing prayer on the beach (Acts 20:36) exemplifies how he entrusted them “to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build” them up (v. 32). In similar fashion, he and Barnabas entrusted—with “prayer and fasting”—the elders of prior church plants “to the Lord in whom they had believed” (14:23). Paul knew he could not force these elders to remain faithful. Their endurance—and ours—rests on God’s sustaining grace and the prayers of His people.

There is a place in God that we only attain through the prayers of others.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 18 And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, 21 testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

—Having missed Passover in Jerusalem (Acts 20:6), Paul now aims to reach his destination by the next major Jewish Feast of Pentecost (20:16). Verses 13-16 relay the itinerary that brought him from Troas to Miletus, about thirty miles from Ephesus. Haste prevents him from entering Ephesus (20:16). Paul knows he can’t visit without getting caught up in all the personal relationships he built there over three years of ministry (20:31). So he focuses on the elders, calling for them to meet him on the beach of nearby Miletus.

—Paul shepherded the Ephesians personally over three years, but now he shepherds through shepherds. This is a farewell speech—his last as a free man.

—The “elders” of verse 17 are called “overseers” in verse 28. The former term derives from Jewish history, where elders led cities, providing judgments and godly oversight. By Paul’s time, elders led synagogues in conjunction with synagogue rulers. The term “overseer” comes from a Greek background, focused similarly on leadership in the city. In church history, “elders” and “overseers” (or “bishops”) became distinct roles, with singular bishops overseeing the church of each city, and with each church in the city having elders. But this does not reflect the New Testament, where elders and overseers were the same. The elder/overseer was tasked not primarily with policymaking, but shepherding (20:28).

—“You yourselves know how I lived among you”:

- Paul modeled the ideal shepherd, which these elders—and all elders everywhere—would be called to emulate.

- Elders/shepherds must be known among the people. If an elder can't begin his sentence with, "You yourselves know how I lived among you..."—it's a red flag. Platform ministers who dwell in green rooms are not the standard. Shepherds are called, rather, to lead God's sheep into green pastures.
- Schreiner: "Video preaching, aloof pastors, or CEO commanders seem moons away from Paul's model."
- *Paul's example was consistent*: "from the first day that I set foot in Asia..." God isn't looking for shepherds to swoop in for a shepherding moment. Laying one's life down is the "night and day" (v. 31) reality of God's true shepherds.
- *Paul's example was Christ-centered, not self-centered*: "serving the Lord with all humility". Before Paul served people, he served the Lord. Obedience to the second commandment (Love people) flows out of the first (Love God). Paul served Jesus, and that flowed into humble servitude toward the flock. Christ-centeredness does not just mean that we proclaim Christ, but also that we live like Him. Elders are foot-washers. They humble themselves in sacrificial service that others readily observe.
- *Paul's example was sacrificial and painful*: "with tears and with trials".
- *Paul's example was courageous*: "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable". Rather than preaching, "Your best life now"—a false gospel of prosperity and comfort—Paul lived the gospel he preached: the suffering of the Messiah. Paul proclaimed hard truths of judgment and persecution, not just savory truths of comfort and salvation.
- *Paul's example was comprehensive*:
 - "teaching you in public and from house to house". He taught in public and in private. Rather than a platform-only preacher, he taught also in small venues. These were not beneath him. He used every avenue available to preach every truth profitable. Not just in pulpits, but living rooms. Not just truth that comforts, but truth that provokes.
 - Another note on Paul's comprehensive ministry is that he preached to all kinds of people: "both to Jews and to Greeks".
 - In short, Paul taught everywhere, to everyone, every part of God's Word. This is the job of an elder.
 - Stott: "He shared all possible truth with all possible people in all possible ways. He taught the whole gospel to the whole city with his whole strength."
 - Of special note for Convergence—a "church of house churches"—we value both large gatherings and small, like Paul, who ministered "in public and from house to house". Both large and small gatherings are part of how the "flock" (20:28) receives the full counsel of God.
- "testifying": This word appears three times (vv. 21, 24, 26). Paul's chief mission was to proclaim the gospel.
- "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ":
 - Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin.
 - When we preach "faith alone saves," this implies repentance. Together, faith and repentance represent "heart conversion." Both are inward.
 - It's obvious that "faith" is inward, but many think of repentance as an outward act—a kind of work. For example, the late Zane Hodges, a leader in the Free Grace movement, taught that repentance is not part of conversion; rather, it's something Christians do after salvation, for spiritual growth. But this is a serious error. Acts 11:18 describes the conversion of the Gentiles by saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." Clearly, repentance is a God-given part of conversion. And while the outward fruits of repentance include generosity, honesty, and integrity (see Luke 3:8–14), the root of repentance, like faith, is inward. To separate it from conversion is to distort the message of salvation.
 - Faith means confidence in God. Repentance means inwardly turning away from sin and toward God. These are "two sides of the same coin" because they happen together: we turn from sin to place our confidence in the Lord.
 - "God" in this verse refers to the Father; "Lord" refers to Jesus. The First and Second Persons of the Trinity are both involved in salvation: we turn toward the Father in repentance and trust

in the Lord Jesus through faith, a single movement of the heart responding to the one God who saves. (The Holy Spirit is involved also—He quickens our hearts to respond in Titus 3:5).

—Schreiner: “Paul does not speak of his exorcisms, healings, or the remarkable success of his ministry. What is important to Paul is that he was a faithful witness to the gospel.”

22 And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 24 But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. 25 And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, 27 for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

—“And now, behold”: Paul transitions from reflections on his past example. Paul has exhortations for them, but his authority to speak into their lives is based on his credible past. It’s the same for every shepherd. Credibility is not rooted in titles, number of followers, or even miracles (even wolves in sheep’s clothing can perform those, Matt. 7:15-23). Our credibility is rooted in the indefatigable example of serving Christ and His people.

—Before Paul even moves to his exhortations, however, he shares why his message is so urgent: he expects to die. “imprisonment and afflictions” await him, and they will never “see my face again.” The true shepherd lays his life down for the sheep. Paul’s message is urgent because he’s on death row.

—Paul also shares the motivation behind his submission to persecution and death: this is God’s plan. He is “constrained by the Spirit” (Acts 20:22). The “Holy Spirit testifies” of persecution, followed by persecution, followed by death. Paul is not chasing persecution as if there is greater glory in a martyr’s death. Elsewhere he says, “If I submit my body to the flames but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13:3). Rather, Paul’s mission reflects submission. It is the same for all of us. Having the Holy Spirit as your guide does not mean your journey will be filled with peaches and rainbows. Sharp loss and many tears are in store for those who submit to God’s mission.

—To help them understand his motivation—submission to God’s mission and plan—Paul applies an athletic metaphor: that “I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God’s grace.” Athletes who finish their race endure much pain, but they consider the prize to be worth it. Likewise, Paul does “not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my race...”

—What is your number one goal in life? To retire and watch your grandkids grow up? To live a comfortable and prosperous life? Soldiers on mission expect pain, not comfort. Athletes who train expect tribulation, not tranquility.

—Can you honestly say that your own “life” is not of “any value” or even “precious” to yourself—compared to finishing your race?

—Each of us has a race marked out for us. Every unforeseen twist, every valley, every uphill push, and the placement of our finish line—God is over all. God designed you for a race, not a cakewalk. Each of us must decide what we value more: finishing well or living comfortably. We can’t have both.

—Paul elsewhere applies this same metaphor: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

—Later, Paul will tell the Ephesian elders to watch themselves first, and then the flock. In 1 Cor. 9:24-27, even Paul considers that he might be disqualified. If you think you’re above disqualification, you’re on the fast-track to arrive there rather than your finish line.

—“ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus”: Our mission is not something we choose; it is what God chooses for us. I am reminded of Ephesians 2:10. After telling us that salvation is by grace and through faith—not works—Paul then frames the significance of good works: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared beforehand for us to do.” The race is marked out; the works were prepared beforehand. We are not saved BY works, but we are saved FOR them—because we ourselves are God’s work; we are God’s “workmanship”, His masterpiece. He saved us to fulfill His mission, to complete His race. He did not save us to fatten us with grace; He saved us to empower us by grace to finish well.

—“testify to the gospel of the grace of God”:

- Paul's race—and ours—involves proclamation. It's not enough to serve; we must proclaim. In fact, we serve (in part) by proclaiming.
- The gospel can be summarized by this phrase: "the grace of God." What makes the news "good" is that we did not deserve it—it was all grace. God, the infinite fountain of grace, overflowed the banks of heaven. Heaven could not contain Him. Jesus came like streams from above, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) so that "from His fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (1:16). That overflowing fountain of grace spilled over, not just in the incarnation, but in the crucifixion—where streams of grace flowed from Jesus's hands, feet, and side. Once Jesus rose, He ascended and poured out the Holy Spirit, our eternal and infinite fountain of continued grace. To the one who believes, "his heart will flow with living water," which is the Spirit, purchased for us on Calvary and given to us at Pentecost (7:38-39).

—"proclaiming the kingdom of God":

- Paul's proclamation of the kingdom is one-and-the-same as his testimony of the gospel of grace. The message of the kingdom IS the gospel.
- What is the relationship? Jesus "Christ" means "Jesus the King." God always intended to rule the earth through humans made in His image (Gen. 1:26-28). In the Ancient Near East, other cultures believed that the king alone was made in the image of the gods, to represent them on the earth. In Genesis 1, however, all of us—men and women—were created in God's image. He designed us to represent Him. Unfortunately, our first parents failed, and so did everyone else. The prophets promised a coming king—a Christ—who would fulfill God's original intention of ruling the earth through man. Jesus died with a sign over His head reading, "King of the Jews." After He rose, He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..." (Matt. 28:18). He died as King of the Jews; He rose as King of the World—commissioning us to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19)—the very nations that now came under His rule (cf. Rev. 1:5). Presently, Jesus reigns in the midst of His enemies (Ps. 110:2). One day, He will return to remove all contest (Rev. 11:15-19). The "gospel of grace" is not just the good news about going to heaven when we die. It's the good news that Jesus—through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension—is King of the World: the rightful heir of Adam, whom God intended to rule the earth, and of David, to whom God promised an eternal throne. Jesus always "reigned over all" as the Second Person of the Trinity, but after His resurrection and ascension, He reigned over all as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, the "man" who would rule eternally. At last, God's intention of ruling the earth through man was fulfilled, in Jesus the God-man. It is also fulfilled in us, for we are "in Christ"—and, as such, we are a "kingdom of priests" (1 Pet. 2:9).

—"whole counsel of God": Not only did Paul preach "the gospel of God's grace" and "the kingdom of God," but he also declared "the whole counsel of God." Paul did not cherry-pick topics that people wanted to hear. He did not shrink back from teaching the hard truths about repentance, judgment, suffering, perseverance, holiness, or the cost of discipleship. He did not reduce the gospel to a mere invitation for personal improvement or future bliss; he proclaimed the fullness of God's redemptive plan—creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. The whole counsel includes not just the promises but also the warnings; not just the blessings but also the demands; not just justification but also sanctification. Faithful shepherds must do the same. It is easier to focus only on grace without kingdom, or kingdom without judgment, or promises without warnings, but to be innocent of the blood of all, we must proclaim the whole counsel of God—His character, His purposes, His commands, His grace, His coming kingdom, and His call to die to ourselves and live for Christ. Anything less leaves God's people vulnerable to deception and spiritual ruin.

—"innocent of the blood of all":

- If we don't proclaim the gospel of grace, the kingdom of God, and the whole counsel of God, we are not "innocent of the blood of all". How can this be?
- Paul is building off Ezekiel, where God warns the prophet of the responsibility he holds for delivering His message to the people: "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but **his blood I will require at your hand.**" (Ezekiel 3:17-18).

- As a faithful shepherd, Paul is a “watchman”. Just as watchmen warn people of danger, shepherds must do the same. If we don’t warn people about the dangers of disobedience, we ourselves become disobedient—guilty along with them.
- Kathryn Krick has risen to star-level status in the charismatic church, and she has stated publicly that God’s people should rarely correct one another. Worse, she says that only leaders have the authority to correct others, which protects her from all criticism. Less blatantly, some in the seeker-sensitive movement have said that we must “focus on Jesus, not correcting sin.” This is unbiblical and dangerous. Of course, we must focus on Jesus. But Jesus Himself tells us to correct sin.
- Failing to correct or warn others when we see danger in their lives—whether it be sin, false doctrine, or an unhealthy direction—makes us complicit in their downfall.
- Contemporary example about the failure to warn: Before the 9/11 attacks, multiple intelligence agencies had gathered warnings about a potential terrorist plot involving al-Qaeda, including specific threats related to hijacking planes. However, these warnings were not effectively communicated or acted upon due to poor coordination between the CIA, FBI, and other agencies, as well as a failure to connect the dots between separate pieces of intelligence. Despite several opportunities to intervene, the warnings were either ignored or mishandled, leading to the devastating attacks. Key figures in the Bush administration and intelligence agencies were held accountable for the failures to act on these warnings.
- Even in the secular world, the public holds those accountable not only those who fail to act on warnings but also those who fail to issue them. It’s the same with God.

28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

—“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock”:

- If you don’t take care of yourself, you can’t take care of others.
- We don’t just “take care” of ourselves casually; no, we “pay careful attention” to ourselves. Like a doctor to a patient—monitoring pulses and blood tests and moles and aches and breathing—except we are our own patient.
- A doctor knows what red flags to look for; so should a pastor.
- A pastor should monitor: felt affection from/for God, growing fruits of the Spirit, increasing knowledge of/love for God’s Word, spiritual disciplines, evangelistic zeal, sharpening of spiritual gifts, spousal intimacy, family connection, radically transparent friendships, boundaries that guard our hearts, compassion for the weak, lavish generosity, hobbies/exercise (to de-stress), *etc.*
- Something happens when humans acquire leadership positions. Formerly humble people begin to feel like the “in crowd”—more important than others. The solution to this temptation is not to flatten all leadership structures. Paul still believes in elders. The solution is for elders to pay careful attention to themselves while remaining accountable to the flock.
- “all the flock”: Elders must not just pay attention to some but rather all the flock. Every sheep matters to the shepherd. Not just the cool ones. Not just the rich ones. Not just the ones he has “chemistry” with. In fact, the true shepherd has a special heart for the loner, the outcast, the nobody, and the weak. That’s who Jesus—the Good Shepherd—hung out with. All good shepherds do the same.
- Schreiner (referencing Barrett): “Barrett describes this [verse 28] as the practical and theological center of the speech.”

—“in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”:

- “in which”: Elders serve inside the flock. They are “overseers,” but they still labor among the flock from which they were drawn.
- Elsewhere, we see Saul and Barnabas appointing elders (Acts 14:23), as well as Titus (Titus 1:5). Paul likewise gives Timothy counsel for selecting elders (1 Tim. 3). But here, we see not the human but the

divine side. One does not contradict the other. People select elders; the Holy Spirit selects elders. Both are true.

- But what about bad elders? We can't imagine that the Holy Spirit would select elders who were bad from the beginning. His whole purpose in selecting elders is "to care for the church of God"—not tear it down.
- There are two ways in which elders can be bad, and none of them have anything to do with the Holy Spirit somehow selecting bad elders:
 - Elders can be bad because people chose them without the Holy Spirit's involvement.
 - Elders can be bad because God chose them, but they turned bad. This is why elders must "Pay careful attention" to themselves—lest they turn bad.
- How do we keep from selecting bad elders? Put differently, how can we ensure that the Holy Spirit is truly making people overseers?
 - *Criteria*: Elders must be chosen who have the requisite character and gifting (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1). Note: only one "gift" is mentioned—"able to teach."
 - *Expectations*: Elders must be chosen who intend to labor night and day in shepherding the flock, not just meeting once/month to set policy.
 - *Process*: Elders must be selected through a Spirit-led process that includes prayer, fasting, communal discernment, and confirmation by other mature leaders (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).
 - *Testing*: Potential elders should be tested and proven over time (1 Tim. 5:22, "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands"), showing fruitfulness and faithfulness in informal shepherding before formal appointment.
 - *Accountability*: Since accountability to the flock is crucial for successful eldership (1 Tim. 5:19-20), it is wise to choose elders who are already accountable to the flock before raising the bar by appointing them as elders.
 - *Diversity*: Organizations tend toward oligarchy. To prevent this, elders in Israel were selected from all twelve tribes rather than concentrating them all from one. When they gathered as one nation, every tribe had a voice. This Old Testament example provides the backdrop for our understanding of New Testament eldership. They must not be chosen out of partiality, which Paul warns strongly against (1 Tim. 5:21). A diverse selection of elders who are drawn from "all the flock" rather than a select club of good ole boys will help ensure that elder selections come from the Holy Spirit.

—"to care for the church of God":

- "care for" is the Greek word normally rendered "shepherd" (see Matt. 2:6; Luk. 17:7; Jhn. 21:6; etc.). Elders are called to shepherd. Shepherding is a dirty job.
- "church of God":
 - The church is not "Pastor Michael's church" or "Pastor Sam's church." It is God's church. Michael and Sam are stewards of God's property—better, God's beloved—which He purchased with the blood of Jesus.
 - It is wrong to derive our sense of worth or importance from belonging to "the best church." Some churches are no doubt holier than others (Rev. 2-3), but they are not "our" churches anyway. They are God's. As God's people, we find our worth not in the prominence of our local church but in the price that was paid for it: Christ's blood.
 - How do you know what something is worth? The price someone was willing to pay for it. What price was paid for you? The precious blood of Jesus.
 - Some have critiqued this kind of language, saying it puts too much emphasis on us—that it's too "me-centered" and not "Christ-centered." But I strongly disagree. The Bible itself speaks this way. Psalm 8, for example, says: "What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor." The psalmist is stunned that the all-powerful Creator would even notice such

small, finite creatures—let alone crown them with honor. And this amazement doesn't detract from God's glory; it enhances it. His greatness is seen in how He stoops down to care for the weak and lowly.

- The writer of Hebrews builds on Psalm 8 and gives it even greater depth. In Hebrews 2, the "Son of Man" who was made "for a little while lower than the angels" is revealed to be Jesus Himself. Through His suffering, death, and resurrection, He was crowned with glory and honor. So now the wonder of Psalm 8 is multiplied a thousandfold: not only did God create tiny people in His image and crown them with glory, but He also sent His Son to redeem them. The value of the church—and of each person in it—is not sentimental flattery. It is gospel reality. We are not "great" because we are inherently impressive, but because the great God has loved us, redeemed us, and made us His own. Our worth is the worth of Christ's blood. And far from making too much of us, this truth makes everything of Him.
- "Which He obtained with His own blood":
 - This creates a fascinating Trinitarian challenge. Did "God"—the Father?—obtain the church through "His own blood"? Are we collapsing the Father and Son into the same Person? Would we ever say that the Father died on the Cross or that the Son sent the Father or that the Holy Spirit spoke creation into existence or that the Son hovered over the waters? (No.)
 - The Athanasian Creed says, "We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance."
 - Rather than confounding the Persons (as in the above examples), we acknowledge their distinctions. The Father is not the Son or the Spirit. The Son is not the Father or the Spirit. The Spirit is not the Father or the Son. Each Person is distinct.
 - Rather than dividing the substance, we acknowledge that the Father, Son, and Spirit are one in divine essence. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Spirit is God.
 - Yet, because we worship one God in Trinity, we do not worship three separate gods—tritheism—we worship the Triune God.
 - In light of Trinitarian truth, "which He obtained with His own blood" cannot mean that the Father died on the Cross for our sins. This is an ancient heresy called, "Patripassianism." This heresy confounds the Persons.
 - So what could it mean? Here are the possibilities:
 - "church of God" could refer to the "Godhead"—Father, Son, and Spirit—rather than the Father specifically. But I don't think this is the case because we still would not refer to "the blood" of the Trinity. Only the Second Person of the Trinity shed His blood.
 - "church of God" could be translated "church of the Lord"—with "Lord" being the normal title for Jesus. Some manuscripts attest to this.
 - "His own blood" could be translated "blood of His own," which is to say, "of the His own Son." This agrees with Trinitarian doctrine and is an acceptable translation in the primary Greek manuscript this was translated from. Furthermore, it was a common way of referring to a dear relative. This fits how the Father would feel about His Son.
 - I prefer the final translation—not because I am a Greek or manuscript expert—but because it accentuates the point Paul is making, therefore matching the context best, while agreeing with Trinitarian doctrine.
 - In this reading, the phrase "His own" becomes intensely personal. The church is purchased with the blood, not merely of a good man or even a prophet, but of God's own Son. This highlights the value of the church and the unfathomable love of God in giving what was most precious to Him.
 - Therefore, the weight of Acts 20:28 is not diminished but heightened. Elders are charged to care for the church that belongs to God, which He bought at the highest possible price—the blood of His own Son. This is why the call to shepherd is sacred, and why abuse or neglect of that calling is so grievous.

- Stott: "Verse 28 clearly teaches that the pastoral oversight of the church belongs ultimately to God himself. Indeed, each of the three Persons of the Trinity has a share in this oversight. To begin with, the church is 'God's church'. Next... it is plain that the purchase price was the blood of Christ. And over this church, which belongs to God and has been bought by Christ, the Holy Spirit appoints overseers.

—"after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from your own selves..."

- The wolves will come from two sources: outside the current elder team ("come in among you") and inside the current elder team ("from your own selves").
- How can this be?! How can wolves arise from within this esteemed eldership? They journeyed thirty miles and wept with Paul on the beach!
 - Let this be a stern warning to every elder. If we don't pay careful attention to ourselves—we can become sheep devourers rather than sheep protectors.
 - Let this be a stern warning to the flock. If elders are unaccountable, they will drift into wolf-iness.
- How can this be—considering I believe in "once a sheep, always a sheep"?
 - It's important to distinguish between two things: someone who appears to be a sheep (or even a shepherd), and someone who truly is. Jesus warned that wolves come in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). Not everyone who looks like a sheep—or a shepherd—is the real thing.
 - Paul's warning does not contradict the perseverance of the saints. Rather, it confirms it. Those who are truly Christ's will persevere to the end. Those who are not will eventually reveal themselves—sometimes slowly, sometimes suddenly—as wolves.
 - But even true believers—true elders—must be vigilant. Though they will not become wolves, they can act wolfishly. They can wound the flock, dominate rather than serve, build their own kingdom rather than Christ's. That's why Paul says earlier in Acts 20:28: "Pay careful attention to yourselves."
 - This is not fear-mongering. It's sober realism. The line between shepherd and wolf is thinner than we like to think—especially if we stop watching our hearts. The shepherd who stops watching himself will soon stop watching the flock.
 - So Paul's warning is not to undermine assurance, but to awaken diligence. It's not to make you question your salvation, but to call you to serious, humble self-examination and a deep dependence on the Chief Shepherd, who alone can keep you from falling (Jude 24).

—"Therefore, be alert": Judas did not remain alert. He began skimming a little off the top of peoples' love offerings. Before long, he was selling his Rabbi for blood money. Sin starts small, but it grows. Before people fall from grace, they drift. Subtle departures precede hard crashes. We observe their end and marvel at the explosion, but Paul warns us to be alert from the beginning—before the crash; before the explosion.

—"remembering": Paul reminds them that this is not a new exhortation. It was constant. For three years, and with many tears, he warned them day and night of this reality. Oh, how sober and weighty is the calling of elder! May every church leader tremble.

—Schreiner: "All pastors live in the era of wolves. Any spiritual sleeping on their part will result in casualties."

32 And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. 33 I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. 34 You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. 35 In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

—"commend you to God and to the word of his grace":

- "commend": "entrust" (NASB); "commit" (NIV).
- This is the same Greek word that appears in a similar context: "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they **committed** them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23).

- Elders must be entrusted to God and the gospel with prayer and fasting. This means we acknowledge something critical: we cannot ultimately preserve the church through strategy, structure, or strength. Paul did everything in his power to set Ephesus up for success, yet the church receives a sharp rebuke from Jesus in Revelation 2, for they had forsaken their first love.
- Only God can guard the church. Through prayer and fasting, we entrust our leaders to God, asking Him to preserve them in holiness of doctrine and behavior.
- But Paul entrusts the elders not only to God but “to the word or his grace”. What does this mean? The same grace that saves us also sustains us. Paul attributes his tireless labors to grace: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, **I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me**” (1 Cor. 15:10).
- Entrusting the elders of Convergence to God and His grace means that we pray for them, fast for them, and trust God for them. Shepherds need their flocks as much as flocks need their shepherds. This is because shepherds never cease to be sheep.
- Schreiner: “Gospel ministry does not fall and rise on the ministers. It is built on the word. It began before us and will continue after us.”

—“which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance”:

- Again, grace does not only save; it sustains. It builds us up. Or, we might say it like this. Grace saved us from the penalty sin (past); it saves us from the power of sin (present); it will save us from the presence of sin (future). In this verse, Paul focuses on the present and future saving power of God's grace. There is never a season or even a moment when we don't need grace. It is the oxygen of spiritual life.
- “inheritance”: Since the inheritance is “among all who are sanctified,” this does not refer to a reward but rather the gift of the kingdom in eternity for all God's children.

—Paul returns to his example of faithfulness. Earlier, he recalled his example to lend credibility to his coming exhortation. Now, he recalls his example as a motivation to do the same. Paul is the model shepherd. How?

- By working hard to care for not only his own needs but those of the weak.
- Good shepherds are hard workers. Good shepherds care for the weak.
- Abusive shepherds put heavy loads on other peoples' shoulders that they themselves are unwilling to bear (Matt. 23:4).
- Abusive shepherds care for themselves, not the weak (Ezek. 34:2-4).

—“remember the words of the Lord Jesus”: We have no record of this in the Gospels. It must have been passed down orally.

—“It is more blessed to give than to receive”: Why? Not because God guarantees wealth to those who “sow a seed” into one's ministry. The blessing is in the giving itself. Pastors must not be money-grubbers, but money-givers.

36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, 38 being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

—Paul expected that one of them would reveal himself as a wolf, yet he knelt and prayed with all of them. Why? He didn't know who the wolf would be. That person hadn't yet arisen. We don't always know who the wolves are, even with intimate contact. They wear sheep's clothing. This is why we must “be alert.”

—Paul had worked so closely with them that his departure resulted in much weeping. This is what it looks like to be a shepherd in Christ's body. We work closely with each other. Our hearts are invested. Good shepherds don't just throw their time into their labor; they give their hearts to their people.