

Finishing Well
Acts 20:17-38
Rev. Brian Bill
November 27-28, 2021

Goodbyes are no fun, are they? We just returned from a few days with our two daughters and their families in Virginia. I cry like a baby every time we leave. In our family, some of our most painful goodbyes were when we left our parents and siblings to serve as missionaries in Mexico City for three years. Another gut-wrenching goodbye was when we left our previous church after 14 years to follow the Lord's leading to serve with you on Team Edgewood. Our family is now experiencing a different kind of farewell, as we say a "long goodbye" to my mom, who was recently placed on hospice.

This week, I asked our five-year-old grandson Pip what "goodbye" means to him: *"Goodbye is when somebody who you really love is going back to their house, and also if their house is far away from somebody else's house."*

As we come to the second half of Acts 20 in our *On Mission* series, we're going to encounter an emotional goodbye from the Apostle Paul. As Paul prepares to leave the Ephesian elders, he gives them an exhortation to keep going as they go back to their far away house. We could summarize his goodbye this way: *If you want to finish well, celebrate God's provision in the past, surrender to His plans in the present, and serve faithfully in the future.*

Last weekend, Pastor Dan did a super job mining for gold nuggets from the first half of Acts 20 as we learned, *"A gospel centered life compels us to Gather, Grow, Give and Go."* Speaking of giving and going, thanks to your generosity, 611 children from around the world will receive the gospel and other gifts in their Operation Christmas Child shoeboxes this year!

Next weekend, we'll begin a December series called, "The Cast of Christmas" as we experience the anticipation of the prophets, the joyful proclamation of the angels, and the journey of the shepherds. We'll see what happens when this cast of characters comes face-to-face with Jesus Christ, the main character of Christmas.

Acts 20:17 sets the context for our text: *"Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him."* Let's look at a map. After three years in Ephesus, Paul journeyed to Macedonia and Achaia to collect an offering for the believers in Jerusalem. On his way back, he landed in Troas, and

considered traveling by land but decided to take the *Channel Cat*, or something like that. As he jetted to Jerusalem, he stopped in Miletus and called the Ephesian elders together for a spontaneous pastors' conference before saying goodbye to them. Miletus is a seaport town, which was as far from Ephesus as Rock Island is to Aledo.

I have benefited from the exegetical outline of Warren Wiersbe and will be utilizing elements of his excellent work to frame our study today. Let's learn how Paul's mode of ministry can serve as a ministry model for us as well.

1. Celebrate God's provision in the past. It's normal to share memories from the past when you reconnect with someone. We do that all the time with our daughters as we remember significant stories and experiences from their childhood. Paul does something similar in verses 18-21: ***“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.”***

- **The manner of his ministry.** From the very first day, Paul spent time with them personally. He was not a religious celebrity who hung out in the green room. Listen to verse 18: ***“I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia.”*** The word **“among”** means he was **“together with them in their midst.”** Paul was a shepherd who spent time with his sheep.
- **The motive for his ministry.** Paul was committed to ***“serving the Lord with all humility.”*** Paul was tough *and* he was tender as he went through trials with **“tears.”** He served the Lord by loving the Lord's people. 2 Corinthians 2:4 gives us insight into his loving leadership: ***“For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.”***
- **The message of his ministry.** In verse 20, Paul says he did not ***“shrink back,”*** which means he didn't avoid sharing the tough truths of God's Word. In verse 27, he asserted, ***“I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”*** The job of a preacher is to proclaim the whole counsel of

God, not holding back anything God says, because everything in His Word is profitable for His people (2 Timothy 3:16). Recently, an Edgewood member wished we had more sermons about the end times. She's right – it's been a while since we focused on the return of Christ. As I was praying about what to preach the day after Christmas, God led me to this title: *“Jesus is Coming Again.”* We'll focus on His first coming during our three Christmas Eve services and Christ's second coming two days later.

I love how Paul ministered in public *and* private ways, teaching in large settings, *and* meeting with people in their homes. This model was established in Acts 2:46 when believers were ***“attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes.”*** Acts 5:42 says, ***“And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.”*** In a similar way, we gather to grow, and we give so we can go with the gospel to our neighbors and the nations.

He not only ministered in every place, but he also spoke to every person: ***“testifying to both Jews and Greeks.”*** As we've pointed out several times, the message of the gospel is ***“repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** In the Greek, repentance and faith are joined together by one article. Acts 3:19 says, ***“Repent and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out.”*** That's why we preach the importance of repenting from sin *and* receiving Christ as Savior.

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2. Surrender to His plans in the present. In verse 22, Paul shifts from the past to the present: ***“And now, behold...”*** This could be translated as, ***“And now, lo and behold!”*** What he is about to say in verses 22-23 is stunning because most of us avoid affliction and steer away from suffering: ***“I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.”***

Because he is *“bound”* by the Spirit and gripped by the calling of God, he doesn't look for the “easy button.” Somehow, the Holy Spirit made it clear ***“imprisonment and afflictions”*** awaited him. The tense indicates the Spirit *“earnestly and repeatedly”* told him this. The word ***“affliction”*** means to be *“compressed, squeezed, and crushed.”* Brothers and sisters, as believers in Christ,

there's no way to avoid affliction. In reflecting on his sufferings in 1 Thessalonians 3:3, Paul said, ***“we are destined for this.”*** 2 Timothy 3:12 doesn't let us off the hook of hardship: ***“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”***

Last week, the Barna Group released the results of a new study with this headline: *“38% of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year.”* Here's the opening paragraph: *“With pastors' well-being on the line, and many on the brink of burnout, nearly two in five pastors have considered quitting full-time ministry. This percentage is up 9 full points (from 29%) since Barna asked church leaders this same question at the beginning of 2021.”*

When I shared this finding at a pastor's roundtable a week ago, one pastor quipped, *“Is that all? I thought it would be much higher!”* I could tell from his face he was part of this stat. Ministering as a minister during Covid and the tumult in our culture has certainly not been easy. However, I read another study which found most pastors are persevering through all the problems. What a good example of how our feelings are not to dictate our faith.

Wiersbe sees six graphic word pictures which explain why Paul didn't pull the plug on ministry. Paul saw himself as...

- **An accountant.** We see this in the first part of verse 24: ***“But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself...”*** As he added up his life, he concluded he was valuable to the Lord, but at the same time, he didn't prize his own personhood. He didn't highly esteem himself because he focused on exalting the Lord. Paul did a regular accounting of his life according to Philippians 3:7-8: ***“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”***
- **A runner.** Look at the next phrase in verse 24: ***“...if only I may finish my course...”*** One of the memories I have with our daughter Lydia is when we would run 5K races together. For old time's sake (I'm the old timer), we ran a Turkey Trot on Thursday. One of the things I used to do in a race is to slow down about a hundred yards before the finish line and tell Lydia I didn't think I could make it. When she would slow down and ask if I was OK, I'd act like I needed to stop and then take off in a sprint to the finish

line, hoping to finish ahead of her. This would never work because she was faster than me! Paul here is not interested in slowing down. He's got the pedal to the metal as he sprints to the finish line.

The word ***“finish”*** means, *“to bring to the full end, to complete the course.”* Paul sees his life as a race to run, and a course to complete. In 1 Corinthians 9:26-27, he is determined to not be disqualified: ***“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.”***

Shortly before he died, he looked back on his life and declared in 2 Timothy 4:7: ***“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”*** In Colossians 4:17, he wants all Christ-followers to finish strong: ***“See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”*** To borrow from the name of Erwin Lutzer's radio ministry: *Let's run to win and not slow down!*

- **A steward.** The third picture is a steward. Notice the next phrase in verse 24, ***“that I received from the Lord Jesus...”*** A steward knows he or she owns nothing but faithfully manages what has been given. As Pastor Dan said last weekend, we are to steward our time, talents, and treasures. Brothers and sisters, everything you have ultimately comes from the Lord and belongs to Him. You just get to manage it. 1 Corinthians 4:2: ***“Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.”***
- **A witness.** Next, Paul pictures himself as a witness who is ***“to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”*** The word ***“testify”*** means to *“solemnly bear witness by affirming something to be true.”* The tense indicates he did so repeatedly with *“earnest intensity.”* Notice how the good news of the gospel and the grace of God always go together.
- **A herald.** The fifth picture is that of a herald in verse 25: ***“And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.”*** The word ***“proclaiming”*** indicates Paul saw himself as one whose job was to declare a message from the king. Wiersbe writes, *“The witness tells what happened to him, but the herald tells what the king tells him to declare.”*

- **A watchman.** The sixth picture is a watchman protecting the walls from the onslaught of the enemy. On our way out to Virginia we spent the night in a hotel. The next morning, I got up early and went to the lobby to do some sermon prep. As the room filled up with people eating breakfast, I asked a mom, who was sitting with her son, to watch my computer while I stepped away for a bit. She said she would.

As I was walking away, I looked back and saw her 8-year-old son standing at full attention watching my computer. I came back and thanked him for his disciplined diligence. He responded with a salute and said, “*Yes, sir. Happy to help!*” After thanking him, I gave him a dollar for being so watchful and told him God has plans and purposes for him. He said, “*Yep, I know that.*” When I asked what he thinks God wants him to do with his life, he said, “*Play video games.*” I decided to just leave that alone.

A watchman’s job is to watch and warn. Listen to verses 26-27: “***Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.***” This image goes back to Ezekiel 3:17-18: “***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.***”

Because Paul warned people of the wrath to come, and preached the whole counsel of God, he was innocent of their blood. Just two chapters earlier, in Acts 18:6, Paul told the Jews: “***Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go the Gentiles.***”

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3. Serve faithfully in the future. As Paul brought his goodbye to a close, he charged the Ephesian elders to serve faithfully in verse 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.***”

- **Heed your own holiness.** The phrase, “*pay careful attention*” was used of keeping a ship on course through a storm. Before a pastor can pastor, he

must give attention to how he's doing personally. Paul pleaded to a young pastor named Timothy to heed his own holiness in 1 Timothy 4:16: ***“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”***

- **Shepherd the sheep.** God calls pastors and church leaders to shepherd and oversee God's flock. This is fleshed out in 1 Peter 5:2: ***“Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly.”***
- **Feed the flock.** The phrase ***“to care for the church of God”*** refers to ***“guiding, feeding, and tending.”*** Every Edgewood pastor takes the feeding of the flock seriously. I echo what Pastor Chuck Smith used to say: ***“I want to have the best loved and best fed sheep on earth.”*** We see God's heart for feeding in Jeremiah 3:15: ***“And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.”*** The reason why feeding the flock with God's Word is so important is because the church has been purchased with the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

Next, Paul gives two warnings because he is certain there will be problems after he leaves.

- **Dangers around you.** We see this in verse 29: ***“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”*** The word, ***“fierce”*** means ***“harsh, heavy, oppressive, severe.”*** Wolves hunt in a pack, often trailing prey for days before launching an attack. They look for weak or straying sheep, isolate them, and move in for the kill (that's one reason to keep gathering with God's people). In addition, wolves often operate in the dark and approach sheep from behind before they even know they are there. Let's take to heart what Jesus said in Matthew 7:15: ***“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”***
- **Dangers among you.** We must also guard ourselves because sometimes danger comes from within according to verse 30: ***“And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”*** The word ***“twisted”*** refers to ***“seductive, distorted, perverted.”*** Paul tells us what he really thinks about these dangers in 2 Corinthians 11:13: ***“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.”***

In verses 31-35, Paul urges these leaders, and us, to serve faithfully in the future so we will finish strong: ***“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.’”***

Wiersbe lists five sins we must guard against.

- **Carelessness.** Verse 31 calls us to ***“be alert,”*** which means *“to pay attention to danger by refraining from sleep.”* Paul modeled this as he admonished believers for three years, with many tears. Paul’s warning and weeping should serve as constant reminders to take our spiritual responsibilities seriously.
- **Shallowness.** Verse 32 challenges us to grow by reading and heeding the word of grace. We must not simply skim on the surface but go deep with God, so we grow in sanctification.
- **Covetousness.** In verse 33, Paul reminded them he did not covet silver, gold, or apparel. Coveting is a consuming and controlling desire for what others have and for more of what we ourselves already have.
- **Laziness.** Paul also pointed out how hard he worked in verse 34, perhaps even holding up his hands to show his callouses from working as a tentmaker.
- **Selfishness.** We’re told in verse 35 to help the hurting and serve those who are suffering. The word ***“help”*** means *“take hold of another by the hand.”* True ministry is all about giving, not getting. Here Paul quotes something Jesus said which is not recorded in the gospels: ***“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”***

John 21:25 tells us Jesus did and said other things which even the books in the whole world could not contain. The phrase ***“more blessed”*** means, *“very much more blessed.”* One way we can experience a big blessing is by participating in Christmas Curbside December 6-7 by giving to Youth Hope, Pregnancy Resources, Safe Families, Christian Care, Active Day Healthcare,

and the Domestic Abuse Shelter. See our website or the sheet in the lobby for more details. As you consider your end-of-the-year giving, can I encourage you to give to *Grow Time* so we can reduce our loan principal on our facility renovation and expansion project?

Speaking of how giving brings bountiful blessings, we want to recognize how God has used Loretta Reynolds as a Sunday School teacher for 62 years! She is stepping down because of some health limitations or she would still be teaching. When I asked what led her to serve for over six decades she humbly replied, *“God has given me many years to pray and to teach. Thanks be to Him, for His mercy endures forever. He gave me the grace and mercy to do it. I felt so inadequate but since God is faithful, I tried to be faithful. I’m going to miss it. The Lord helped me.”* Loretta, there is no doubt you will hear these words from the Savior you love, ***“Well done, good and faithful servant.”***

When I took her picture a couple weeks ago, Tara Carter was sitting behind her and said, *“She was my teacher!”* Tara told me she was very kind, but she didn’t let anyone mess around! Loretta also taught Tara’s daughters. Among others she has taught are Lisa Matya, our missionary Stacey Hohbein, and Patty Steele.

I reached out to Patty to get her thoughts: *“One thing that has always been an example to me is Loretta’s faithfulness. Even when Loretta was experiencing some of life’s heartaches, there she would be ready to teach her girls. Recently, I had the privilege of observing Loretta teach. She still shows a calm spirit and has a sweetness to her delivery as she presents God’s word and touches the lives of these little ones. It has been an honor having her as my teacher and having her as a colleague. She will be greatly missed, but fondly remembered, by the primary department. Also, in my own family she taught not only me, but Suzy, Abby, and Bryn. That’s 3 generations!”*

If she was your teacher, or she taught someone in your family, would you raise your hand?

If you want to finish well like Loretta, celebrate God’s provision in the past, surrender to His plans in the present, and serve faithfully in the future.

After focusing on finishing well, Paul gave his final goodbye in verses 36-38:

“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.” The phrase “*knelt down*” has the idea of falling to one’s knees. As Paul prayed, they lamented. The phrase “*much weeping*” means they were wailing loudly.

As they clung to him, they also kissed him on the cheek repeatedly and affectionately. While they were going to miss him personally, it was the preaching of the “*word he had spoken*” they would miss the most. Knowing that going with the gospel always involves hard goodbyes, they “*accompanied*” or “*sent him*” to the ship.

Application

I offer two applications today, one for those of you who are not yet saved, and the other for followers of Christ.

1. Repent and receive Christ. If you don’t know Christ through the new birth, I must warn you. If you haven’t trusted in the shed blood of Jesus for salvation, you will pay the price with your own blood by spending eternity in a hot place called Hell. Turn from your sins right now by repenting, believe Jesus died in your place on the cross and was raised on the third day, and receive Him as your Savior and Lord.

2. Recalibrate and refocus. If you’re a Christ-follower but have drifted, it’s time to recommit yourself to follow Him faithfully until you reach the finish line! Do you need to confess any sin? Do you have a backslidden heart? Ask God to break you and put you back together. Let’s be like our teens and plead with God to send revival. Psalm 85:6: “*Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*”

God Be With You

The practice of saying “goodbye” goes back centuries. The phrase, “*So long, farewell...*” makes some of us think of *The Sound of Music*” while “*Hasta la vista*” which literally means, “*until the view,*” takes others back to the Terminator movies. Some of us say, “*See you later [alligator]*” or simply “*later.*” Or if you’re texting, it might be “*CYA,*” “*TTYL*” (talk to you later), “*TTFN*” (ta-ta for now), or “*BRB*” (Be right back).

The Spanish phrase “*Vaya con Dios*” means, “*Go with God.*” Even the word “*Adios*” means, “*to God.*” The word “goodbye” originally came from the old

English, “*godbwye*,” which was a contraction of the farewell phrase, “*God be with ye!*” Because they didn’t have the means of communication or transportation like we have today, people never knew if they would see or talk to each other again once they parted. Saying “*God be with you*” became a sincere sendoff.

Because we left Virginia very early Friday morning, we said our goodbyes before going to bed Thursday night. Before leaving, we wrote a note with this P.S.: “*Not ‘goodbye’ but ‘God be with you.’*” Here’s an idea. Let’s bring back “*God be with you*” when we say goodbye to someone.

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If you’re up for singing your goodbyes, you could sing these lyrics, which appear to be based on Paul’s parting words in Acts 20:

*God be with you till we meet again;
By His counsels guide, uphold you,
With His sheep in love enfold you;
God be with you till we meet again.*

*God be with you till we meet again!
When life’s perils thick confound you,
Put His arms unfailing round you;
God be with you till we meet again*

*Till we meet, till we meet
God be with you till we meet again
Till we meet, till we meet
Till we meet at Jesus’ feet*

Please stand and receive God’s goodbye recorded for us as a benediction in Numbers 6:24-26: “***The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.***”

New Members 10:45 – Matt and Hannah Fowler, Marissa Cassius