

Text: Acts 20.17-38  
St Stephen's

April 6, 2008  
Sun

## Nothing Held Back

### Famous last words...

#### Inspiring

"Let's Roll" Todd Beamer

#### Uninspiring

**I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis.**

Who: [Humphrey Bogart](#)

**This is absurd! This is absurd!**

Who: [Sigmund Freud](#)

**They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance.**

the final words of General [John Sedgwick](#), Union Commander in the U.S. Civil War, who was hit by sniper fire a few minutes after saying them, in 1864.

Today we look at some famous last words of the Apostle Paul, his final message to the Church at Ephesus. Paul is heading for Jerusalem at the end of his **3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey...**

Stopped in **Miletus**, some 30 miles from **Ephesus**, where he earlier spent some 3 years planting and building that church. It has been a year since he last visited, and he **sends for the elders** of the church to ask them to come and meet him at the port city for a **brief visit**. Probably about 3 days later, they arrive.



If we had been the church at Ephesus Paul would have called out to the port city the clergy and Vestry and staff and small group leaders and teachers – **all who lead a ministry...**

And what Paul said to the leaders he wanted **repeated to all** the members of the church. That is why Luke wrote it down. **Because everyone is on the ministry team...** Moms and Dads are pastors in their family. You are a minister when you know a co-worker whose marriage is failing. When you have a friend in the hospital. When you know a neighbor who has lost their job. When you know a Mom or a Dad who is having a hard time with the kids. **Everyone is on this team.**

BTW, This is the only speech Luke records in Acts that was **spoken entirely to Christians...** This Paul knew, would be **his last visit** with the people of this church, his last chance to talk to them, his last sermon. It was important.

His comments are grouped in **three clusters**: He talks about **his past example, his future prospects, and their present needs.**

## **His Past Example**

How we live our lives is a tremendous testimony to the reality of our faith. There is nothing like the example of a changed life... AZ's testimony today...

Paul says to the ministry teams of Ephesus...

"You know how I lived the whole time I was with you... I served the

*Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested...*

*You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you...*

Acts 20:18-20

Note the **repetition of "you know"**. They did know, because Paul had lived with them for several years. You can tell what people are like when you live with them. Families are **the most honest places** in the world, because inside the family there's **no pretending**. Well, **Paul lived with** the families that he served. He was often **a guest** in their houses. They knew how he lived...

What was wonderful was that **the message** he preached and **the way he lived matched**. The gospel can do that. It has the power to so deeply affect who you are that the way you live and the words you speak match up.

He picks up the theme again in vv 33-35

*I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak..."*

Acts 20:33-35

'**You yourselves know...**' that I wasn't after your money, I worked hard and gave generously.' And they did know.

Paul had written to the Corinthians...

*"Be imitators of me as I am of Christ..." 1 Cor 11.1*

They knew

- His Tears
- His Teaching
- His Hard Work
- His 'give it all' generosity

They knew that with Paul, there was **nothing held back...** Everything was given.

Paul knew that **his words and his deeds** would both speak, and they needed to speak the same message... **St Francis** used to say it like this... 'Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.'

## His Future Prospects

The future is a frightening thing to many of us. **We worry** about it a great deal. We worry about how our kids will do. We worry about the economy and the war. We worry about old age. We worry in the middle of the night. We do worry about the future.

**Question:** If someone could tell you in clear detail what your life would be like 10 years from now, would you want to know? Many of us would pass on that one.

Well **Paul knew some things** about his future...

*I know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.*

Acts 20:22-24

That is something to know. Paul had **been through a lot**. Now, he heard again and again from the Holy Spirit that **it was going to get worse**, not better. But it didn't matter to him.

We jump to **verses 29-30** and see that Paul knew something else about the future...

*I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.*

Acts 20:29-30

He knew that **as soon as he left**, this church would be **attacked**. That church was his life work. He loved that church. But he knew there would be opposition to the gospel from outside the church and from inside the church. Isn't that interesting.

And we look at verses 25 and mark **one more thing Paul knew** about his future...

*"Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.*

Acts 20:25

This was the **last time** they would see Paul, because he knew his future lay in Rome and Jerusalem, and – if God granted it – on to the west to Spain. So Ephesus would have to **carry on without him**, go it alone.

It would be a tall order. **Hardships** for the apostle. **Opposition** – fierce wolves opposition - from without and within for this young church. And their beloved apostle would sail away within an hour.

**Want to sign up for that leadership team?** I think you have!

## **The Present Need**

What would Paul say in a moment like that? What would you? Here we go...

*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*

Acts 20:28

"*Keep watch...*", he writes. Keep watch, and **start with yourself**. Watch out for **the wolves** for yourself. Watch out for **what you believe** and watch out for **temptation** and watch out for Jesus.

Make sure that what you believe affects how you live. Make sure you live a 'nothing held back' life, lived for him who held nothing back. Live a 'give it all' life, lived for him who gave it all. 'Imitate me as I imitate Christ', Paul says.

*'Keep watch over one another' "Be shepherds..."* of the flock. Protect them. Pastor them. Care for them. Have compassion for them. Be as patient/merciful with people as God has been with you...

**Sheep are valuable...** *"Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."* The church is the people (not the buildings), and the people of Jesus **belong to God...** and **matter to God**; the measure of your value to him is the blood of his son; we will persist in love if we remember how much God's love is...

What Paul **does not say is, 'run for it'**. 'Go find a church that doesn't have these challenges and join it.'

He says, **lean into it**. Stand firm. Be on your guard. Keep your eyes open. Watch out for those wolves. Take care of these sheep.

**Twenty nine years ago** this summer Bec and I were preparing to go to our first church. We were with people at St Lukes' in Akron, a year out of seminary, a child in arms, getting ready to go to a small parish up on Lake Erie. We were in a room with 20 people who were committing us to this work in prayer. I had **a vision** in that prayer meeting. There was a large white boat on the water, and a gathering storm in the distance. The storm was vicious, threatening. We were wondering if we should run for safe port. There was a lot of fear. Then I heard the voice of the Lord say, I have taken the helm. We must sail into the storm. I never forgot the vision...

And then Paul closes with two phrases that are the heart of his confidence. They would become **Paul's 'famous last words'** in that Ephesian church:

*"Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*

Acts 20:32

*...remember the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* "

Acts 20:35

**He turns them over to the word of grace.**

- **Grace is** the freely given love of God in Jesus.

- It is the '*It is more blessed to give than receive*' love of God. Those are grace words.
- Grace is the forgiving love of the cross. The 'nothing held back' love of Jesus.
- Grace is the undeserved, unearned, penetrating love of God that will seep into every corner of your soul, every moment of your life, every dark corner, till all is clean, till all is forgiven, till your manner of life and your manner of speech say the same thing – say 'nothing held back, all given, all for Jesus, all for grace.

That is his plea, that they speak it and live it. And hold nothing back. Give. Just like Jesus. Live it and talk about it. That's all.

'I commit you to that', Paul says. 'I trust you to that. I turn you over to that.'