

Time for a Fond Farewell

Acts 20:13–38

We have a small group couple that is going through a tough time right now. If you are a pet lover or have fur babies you might understand. They have a 13 year old dog they got when they were first married. They also have a 12 year old daughter who considers that dog her best friend. After all, that dog has always been a part of her life. Daisy, the dog, is in the final stages of congestive heart failure. It is a hard moment in their lives because they know she probably needs to be put down at some point soon but they just can't muster the strength to say farewell to their faithful furry family member.

There are some moments in life that are easy and then there are moments when words don't come easily. Moments like explaining to your children that you have to make this kind of decision. There are also moments when we know that something is changing, but our hearts aren't quite ready for the change. And sometimes, one of the hardest things we ever have to do is say goodbye.

Acts chapter 20 gives us one of those moments. Paul is traveling toward Jerusalem and he knows that the journey ahead will not be easy. He knows that his ministry in some places is coming to an end. So, he stops along the way and calls for the elders of the church at Ephesus. What follows is one of the most personal and emotional passages in the book of Acts. Paul doesn't preach a great evangelistic sermon, doesn't give them a list of church programs or tell them how to build a bigger church. Instead, he talks about his life, his ministry, his faithfulness, their responsibility, and the fact that they may never see him again.

Let's get going...let's dig in to this powerful account beginning in verse 13.

¹³ Paul went by land to Assos, where he had arranged for us to join him, while we traveled by ship. ¹⁴ He joined us there, and we sailed together to Mitylene. ¹⁵ The next day we sailed past the island of Kios. The following day we crossed to the island of Samos, and^[e] a day later we arrived at Miletus. ¹⁶ Paul had decided to sail on past Ephesus, for he didn't want to spend any more time in the province of Asia. He was hurrying to get to Jerusalem, if possible, in time for the Festival of Pentecost.

If you can't tell, Paul is traveling and I don't mean vacay or holiday. This entire section is filled with movement. In these four verses we see seven different locations identified. Paul knows he is going somewhere but what is interesting is that Paul doesn't know everything that is going to happen along the way. He has an inkling because verse 22 says he knows there will be difficult days ahead.

*And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don't know what awaits me,
²³ except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead.*

Like Paul, **We don't always know where the road we are asked to travel will lead or what may happen.**

Paul doesn't know everything but he knows God and sometimes that is enough. Let me ask you a question. Wouldn't you like to know what tomorrow holds for you? Or what is going to happen in the next couple of months? Wouldn't we would like to know where every road is going to lead and what obstacles we might come up against? Faith doesn't require us to know everything.

What faith requires is for us to trust the One who does know everything. There are times when God changes our circumstances before He explains them to us, if he does at all. There are times when God closes one door before we understand why another door is opening. And then, there are times when we wish God would give us a five-year plan when He is only giving us enough light for the next step. Isn't that what faith is though? Trusting God with the road we cannot see?

Paul was willing to keep moving because he had that kind of faith. Look at verse 17 with me if you will.

17 But when we landed at Miletus, he sent a message to the elders of the church at Ephesus, asking them to come and meet him. 18 When they arrived he declared, "You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now 19 I have done the Lord's work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews. 20 I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. 21 I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike - the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus.

Paul never believed that his ministry was about Paul, it was about the Lord. The church – the ministry – the people, none of it belonged to Paul. It belonged to God. Pastors are temporary. Church members are temporary. Church buildings are temporary as are programs and seasons. The work of God is beyond any one person's ministry. That is an important truth for every pastor and for every member of the church

Well, what does Paul's faithfulness actually look like? How does he describe it? First of all, Paul points to his life work among them. So, what kind of work has Paul done? Whose work has he done? Check out verse 24.

24 But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus - he work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God. 25 "And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again. 26 I declare today that I have been faithful. If anyone suffers eternal death, it's not my fault, 27 for I didn't shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know.

What was Paul's work?

-Let's look back up at verse 20 and then here in verse 27 Paul says he never shrank back from telling the people what they needed to hear. When we look at what we have already read, do you remember when he mentioned doing the Lord's work humbly and with many tears? Let me tell you as a pastor, there can be some extremely hard moments when you really like people in the congregation and have to have difficult conversations with them about something in their life that may not be pleasing to the Lord. Some people see it as hurtful in the moment but if it leads to repentance then it was worth it. Paul says I have to tell them because he doesn't want anyone to be able to say that he didn't care about their eternity enough to tell them about something that may affect their eternity.

Paul also tells the people that they will never see him again but Paul felt comfortable in leaving because he knew he had done what God had called him to do in that particular season. He had preached. He had taught. He had served. He had encouraged and he had loved. Paul didn't preach only the easy things, the things that tickle peoples' ears. He preached the hard truth.

There were probably times when people loved Paul's preaching and there were probably other times when they didn't. There were times when Paul's message encouraged people. There were times when Paul's message confronted people. But Paul's responsibility wasn't to make everyone happy. His responsibility was to be faithful. And that is the calling of every pastor. A pastor cannot make everyone happy. No pastor ever has and no pastor ever will. The goal of a pastor isn't to make everybody happy but to be faithful to God.

Paul continues on with a warning and an encouragement for the people. Look at verse 28.

²⁸ "So guard yourselves and God's people. Feed and shepherd God's flock - his church, purchased with his own blood - over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders. ²⁹ I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. ³¹ Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you. Paul knew the church at Ephesus would continue without him.

So guard yourselves he says and take care of the church. Why? It is a precious thing because Jesus paid a steep price for it. He is talking to the leaders here telling them "Now it is your turn." The work of the church doesn't stop just because Paul leaves. The Gospel doesn't stop. The church doesn't stop nor does the mission stop. Why? Because God doesn't stop. Paul's departure was not the end of the church. It was simply the beginning of another chapter. So here is something we all need to understand.

God's work is bigger than any one person.

Sometimes we incorrectly think that if "this person leaves" or "that person leaves" things will fall apart. "What will happen if the pastor leaves?" "What will happen if our circumstances change?" When we ask that question the answer is God will still be God. The same God who was here yesterday will be here not only today but tomorrow as well. The same Jesus who saved us yesterday will still save people today. The same Holy Spirit who empowered the early church will still empower the church today. The Word of God will still be the same and still be true. And, the Great Commission will still be our mission.

We can trust Jesus with the future of the kingdom church and the future of MABC because they have always belonged to Jesus.

Let's move on to verse 36.

³⁶ When he had finished speaking, he knelt and prayed with them. ³⁷ They all cried as they embraced and kissed him good-bye. ³⁸ They were sad most of all because he had said that they would never see him again. Then they escorted him down to the ship.

Wow! What a touching moment when he finishes speaking to them and he kneels and prays with them. We are told the people cried, hugged him and they were sad because he was going to be gone, never coming back.

This is a farewell. A fond farewell but still a very difficult farewell. It is also an encouraging farewell because Paul teaches us something very important.

A goodbye does not mean that God is finished.

Sometimes God simply means that one season is finished. Seasons change. Right now we are anxiously awaiting this summer season to change to fall because it has been difficult. It hasn't been an easy summer. And even the transition to fall will still have its ups and downs. By January, we will be screaming for the summer season once again.

I want to ask you not to pretend that this was easy for Paul and let's not pretend it was easy for the Ephesians. Verse 37 says they all cried which to says that even Paul cried. The Ephesian church leaders are crying because they are hurting. Why? Because they loved Paul. Sometimes tears are evidence of love. Sometimes saying goodbye hurts precisely because what you are saying goodbye to mattered greatly. Understand that following Jesus doesn't mean we never grieve. Following Jesus though does mean that even when we grieve, we don't grieve without hope. There is a difference. We can be sad and still trust God. We can hurt and still believe God. We can cry and still worship.

Notice that Paul didn't tell them not to cry nor he didn't tell them not to be sad. He allowed them to grieve but most importantly he reminded that God was in control. Sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is acknowledge that something hurts but then in faith we add "I still trust God."

Paul loved these people, there is no question about it but Paul also understood something very important.

Loving something does not mean you must hold onto it forever.

There are seasons when God asks us to hold on and there are seasons when God asks us to let go. There are seasons when God says, "Stay" and some seasons when he says "Go." There is a difficult truth in this because both can be acts of obedience. Sometimes we think obedience always means staying where we are but that isn't necessarily so. Sometimes obedience means leaving. Sometimes obedience means stepping away from something we love. And sometimes obedience means trusting God with people we would rather continue to shepherd ourselves. Paul had to release the Ephesian church into the hands of God. Doing so was perhaps one of the greatest expressions of love there is. Trusting God enough to let go.

With all of that being said...I want to move from Paul's farewell to something personal. There are moments in ministry when a pastor stands before a congregation and realizes that the words he is about to say may be some of the most difficult words he has ever spoken. I informed the leadership team and the ministry team this weekend that this morning I would be saying farewell to you all. Over the last 6 months or so God has been working on our hearts in a very difficult manner.

I told you a couple of weeks ago that God was faithful and shared this verse from 1 John.

But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. 1 John 1:9 NLT

I have not hid from anybody that for a decade or so before God called me to ministry, I wasn't a very faithful person. I had walked away from the faith to pursue a life of football and worldly things. It had some very heavy consequences in terms of my family legacy in the faith realm. That is what really brings us to this point to day.

I asked God to forgive me of that period of my life and he reminded me that I had promised to go into ministry way back in middle school. And when I confessed and asked for forgiveness he

said it was time. I, of course, like so many people said “but Lord!” His reply was No buts, I have forgiven you.” And he asked me to follow me once again but this time it is all in. Sherry and I started on this wonderful journey of helping churches overcome difficult times and renew their passion for ministry. However, not all of our family joined us on this journey. Our two oldest daughters were not as big a part of this journey as was Julie our youngest and you can tell. Despite the fact that they were all baptized and accepted Jesus only one is living that life now and bearing the fruit that Jesus is looking for. Please don’t get me wrong, it is not that the other two are not good people, they are wonderful parents. Except in one area of life and that area of life has eternal consequences.

Well, that is on me because I am the spiritual leader of this family and I didn’t lead well for a long season. This fruitless faith life of my daughters is the consequence of my sin. I am reminded of David, who despite being called a man after God’s own heart, experienced both forgiveness and consequences. After his affair with Bathsheba and the orchestrated killing of her husband, God pronounced the consequences. In 2 Samuel 2:10 God said there would always be violence and rebellion within his family. A daughter was raped by a son, that son was murdered and then a son rebelled against David and tried to take his kingdom. Probably the most touching and hardest was the death of the son born to Bathsheba. That is only one account of David’s sin and the consequences. There is another telling action that takes place in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 regarding a census that David takes that costs the lives of thousands of people.

Our consequence is that right now we have grandkids in our family who do not have the opportunity to grow their faith. This is where God has been working on me. A couple of times over the last six months the 4-14 window has come up in sermons. That 4-14 window says that 83% of people who follow Jesus make that choice between the ages of 4 and 14. Our oldest grandson was 14 when he made a choice to follow Jesus at a men’s conference in Dallas that I took him to for a weekend. He works every weekend and doesn’t make it to church much but he didn’t miss a Wednesday night youth group last year. As part of his upcoming graduation he and I are making a trip to a big men’s conference in Virginia in the spring. He is not only excited to go to the conference but he gets to fly for the first time. Our youngest daughter’s two boys made decisions for Jesus before their 12th birthdays and are serving in church, going through youth leadership programs. But then we have three more – a 13 year old, a 12 year old and a 10 year old. The 12 year old and the 10 year old are showing signs of interest in faith matters but we may have already lost the 13 year old to the world. God can do some amazing things though!

The problem is their parents are not fostering an interest in them growing in their faith. There are a few key moments in this past summer that really started bring our issue home. There was the talk of the 4-14 window a couple of times of course. At Patti Horner’s memorial service a man I didn’t know was talking to me about ministry and said he had known some kids who were PK’s (preacher’s kids) and that they felt their dad had more involvement with his church family than he did his kids and grandkids. Ouch! Then, and I love Ian, but as I am driving Ian to camp this summer which was about 2.5 hours away, I began to think...that’s about how far it is for me to drive to KC area and take my granddaughters to church. A couple of weeks ago Sherry and I went up to our KC family to remodel our soon to be 13 year old’s bedroom on Friday and Saturday. When we were getting ready to leave late Saturday afternoon our 10 year old looked at us puzzled and asked “Are you not staying so we can go to church tomorrow?” Another ouch!

A couple of weeks ago in our men's life study class we were watching a speaker from a conference and he said that a man's greatest legacy is not what he leaves in a will but what he leaves in his children and grandchildren. In our "faith to discipleship teachings" this summer we talked about proximity. Proximity is why I was able to reach Blake our oldest grandson. Now, he will call and ask if he and his girlfriend can come over and play games with us. Sherry and I need to create that proximity with all of our kids.

So, this weekend I sent a message to the leadership team and ministry team letting them know of my intent to step down as pastor of MABC at the end of 2026. Not because we don't love you because we do but because we love our grands a little more. By not pastoring the church, we can make it one to two times a month to KC area to take the girls. And I say girls because I am hoping the 13 year old will join us. I know the 10 year old is excited about the idea! Then one to two times per month we can get our soon to be 13 year old grandson in Derby to church.

Our long-term prayer has been that the Lord would bring some faithful people into our oldest two daughters' social circles and that hasn't happened. But maybe, just maybe, if our grandkids can get connected in a church with some other kids, the parents of those kids can get in proximity to our daughters and God will use them to do something amazing.

I will be talking to leadership this afternoon and have talked to the head of ministries about staying with the youth group at least throughout the rest of the school year. That would be our desire but the leadership of the church will need to address that issue. There are some good things going on here, things we are excited about.

So with all of that being said...I want you to remember this from these past 7 weeks of messages about the Church...

THE CHURCH MUST REMEMBER WHAT MATTERS MOST!

Paul's farewell wasn't centered on Paul. I pray that you remember all the things I said this morning before I informed you of our ministry decision. This message was centered on Christ because that's what matters most.

²⁴ But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus - the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.

The Gospel - not Rick or Sherry - is the focus. It is not about personalities or preferences, positions or traditions. The focus isn't about who sits where or who gets credit for things. I hope that you all - as a church - would remember during a season of transition, not to lose sight of Jesus.

Don't let a coming change in leadership become a distraction from the mission. Don't allow sadness - or for some of you, excitement...become division. Don't allow uncertainty to become fear. Keep preaching the Gospel. Keep loving people. Keep reaching people. Keep serving, worshipping, trusting. Keep moving forward.

And most of all, keep praying. Keep praying for God's leading. You may not know what tomorrow looks like but God does.

Heavenly Father....We thank you for every season in life you give us. We thank you for the seasons of new beginnings, the seasons of growth, the seasons of service, and even the seasons of change.

Thank you for the people you bring into our lives and for the memories we share together. When the road ahead is uncertain, give us faith; when our hearts are heavy, give us peace. When we must let go, give us grace; when a new chapter begins, give us courage.

Help us never to forget that this church belongs to you. Help us never to lose sight of Jesus. Help us continue to preach the Gospel, love people, serve faithfully, and reach those who need to know your grace.

And whatever tomorrow brings, may we trust you. May we walk forward together in faith. And may everything we do bring honor and glory to Jesus Christ.

In His name we pray.

Amen.