

Keep Watch!

Read: Acts 20.28-38.

In the early church there weren't the kinds of distinctions we find in churches today – the elders (presbyters) are also described as overseers (bishops) and shepherds (pastors).

“Now it's up to you. Be on your toes – both for yourselves and your congregation of sheep. The Holy Spirit has put you in charge of these people – God's people they are – to guard and protect them. God himself thought they were worth dying for” (*The Message*).

“Keep watch... be on your guard.” Even though the Lord's people are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, they will be facing danger from those who would take advantage of their simple faith. John warned his readers, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn 4.1). Tragically, there are people who make a very plausible claim to be Christians but whose teaching is contrary to the Word and Spirit of Christ. Jesus warned, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Mt. 7.15).

“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). Paul commits them to God – the God who has revealed himself – and to the word of his grace. God isn't separated from his revealed word. We don't have faith in God without trust in the Bible. God's word of grace is able to “build us up and give us an inheritance...”

“It is more blessed to give than to receive” (v. 35). These words of Jesus aren't found in any of the four gospels. The giver is happier than the receiver. Paul himself has had great joy in serving them.

Reflect:

- “Be prepared”. None of us knows what the future may hold. Paul was trying to prepare the Ephesian elders for what lay ahead. How can we be prepared? How can we pay more careful attention to the word of God's grace in our own lives, and in the church and community?

5. Loving and Serving. Reading: John 13.1-17; 21.1-23.

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Studies for Home Groups
by Peter J Blackburn

4. KEEP WATCH!

Reading: Acts 20.13-38

Which is more important, the journey or the destination? These days many argue that the journey is the most important – the process – almost as if it doesn't matter where we end up!

Parents know well the two family travel questions– their own “Are you ready yet?” and the children's “Are we there yet?” As adults, we often find great delight in the journey. There are sights along the way before we arrive at the destination.

Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of the Scouting movement, said in his farewell message to his Scouts:

I believe that God put us in this jolly world to be happy and enjoy life. Happiness does not come from being rich, nor merely being successful in your career, nor by self-indulgence. One step towards happiness is to make yourself healthy and strong while you are a boy, so that you can be useful and so you can enjoy life when you are a man.

Nature study will show you how full of beautiful and wonderful things God has made the world for you to enjoy. Be contented with what you have got and make the best of it. Look on the bright side of things instead of the gloomy one.

But the real way to get happiness is by giving out happiness to other people. Try and leave this world a little better than you found it and when your turn comes to die, you can die happy in feeling that at any rate you have not wasted your time but have done your best. ‘Be Prepared’ in this way, to live happy and to die happy – stick to your Scout Promise always – even after you have ceased to be a boy – and God help you to do it.

“Be Prepared” is a good motto – for beginning and continuing the Christian life, and for staying focused on the goal.

Reflect:

- Which is more important for us, the journey or the destination? What are some of the ways we need to “be prepared”?

En route to Jerusalem

Read: Acts 20.13-16.

Paul's third missionary journey has taken him through Asia Minor and across to Macedonia – through Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. He has long had a desire to go to Rome. However, having heard about hardship of the Christians in Jerusalem, he is taking up a collection and heading there first.

In a number of centres he has encountered strong opposition from members of the Jewish community. He knows his visit to Jerusalem may not be the easiest, but he is “in a hurry” – he wants to arrive “if possible, by the day of Pentecost” (v. 16). He wants to see the Ephesian elders, yet needs to take the most direct route to Jerusalem.

Paul's Manner of Life

Read: Acts 20.17-21.

Ephesus was only some fifty kilometres away from Miletus, so the elders from Ephesus come to Miletus to meet Paul.

Paul's time in “the province of Asia” has not been at all easy. He has been “severely tested by the plots of the Jews” (v. 19). On his second missionary journey, the record says that they were “kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia” (16.6). We aren't told the manner of this guidance. In some way the people of the province weren't ready for the message. Certainly, on the third journey, the major opposition in Ephesus itself had come from the silversmiths and Artemis-worshippers (19.23ff).

“I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (20.21). As he wrote to the Romans, “I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Rom. 1.16).

Reflect:

- How can our lives show more consistently and persistently than they do the gospel of salvation for all in our community?



Paul's Prospects

Read: Acts 20.22-27.

Paul is now bound for Jerusalem with a sense of spiritual constraint – as we read in the previous chapter, “After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. ‘After I have been there,’ he said, ‘I must visit Rome also.’” (19.21).

A short time earlier, Paul had written to the Roman Christians, “Pray also that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judaea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed” (Rom. 15.31-32).

These misgivings found increasing confirmation as he went from port to port on his voyage to Palestine; in city after city the Holy Spirit, speaking presumably through the lips of prophets, as later at Tyre and Caesarea (Ch. 21.4,11), showed him that imprisonment and tribulation would be his lot when he reached Jerusalem” (FF Bruce, *Acts*, 414).

But nothing – not even life itself – is more important to Paul than “the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace” (20.24). Later Paul was to write, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4.8).

Paul is able to declare, “I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Acts 20.26-27).

I have not kept back; I have not been deterred by fear, by the desire of popularity, by the fact that the doctrines of the gospel are unpalatable to people, from declaring them fully... He had not disguised any truth; he had not withdrawn or kept it from open view, by any apprehension of the effect which it might have on their minds. Truth may be disguised or kept back: by avoiding the subject altogether from timidity, or from an apprehension of giving offence if it is openly proclaimed; or, by giving it too little prominence, so that it shall be lost in the multitude of other truths... (Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Bible*).

Reflect:

- We have a commission to fulfil with some urgency. The issues are life and death for other members in our community. God's offer is life. What more can we do to reach out to others with genuine love and urgency?