

The Gospel Ministry

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[0 : 0 0] So we're in the book of Acts and we're up to Acts chapter 20 and this is a story of Paul. Paul was a missionary that took the Gospel, the story of Christianity to Europe for the first time and this is Paul on his third missionary journey. He took three missionary journeys that we know of, maybe four. And on this journey he planted one of the most important churches he ever planted in a big city called Ephesus and he was there for three years in Ephesus living with the people that you read about here. And now he's left Ephesus for a while and he's on his way back kind of reversing his exact route towards Jerusalem because he feels like the Holy Spirit has called him to come to Jerusalem and he's in a hurry.

And so he asked the Ephesian elders, the guys that he trained up to lead the church in Ephesus to kind of meet him in the middle a little bit. He asked them to meet him in Miletus which is a port town right on the coast. It's about 50 miles away from Ephesus so in order that he didn't have to travel 50 miles inland and not get to Jerusalem in the time he was trying to get there, they come to him. And this is Paul's farewell address to his disciples, to the people that he trained at, that he mentored if you will, at Ephesus. And it's not unlike, commentators will say, it's not unlike Jesus' farewell address to his disciples in the book of John. Paul is setting his face towards Jerusalem and he says that he is prepared to go there and die. And so he's giving a farewell address to the people that were serving underneath him in this passage. And so because it's Paul speaking to elders, leaders in a local church, most of the time if you've ever heard this passage preached or studied it, it probably was preached in the context of talking to the leaders of the church and the elders because it's directed to elders. But this is the only passage in the entire book of Acts that is speech. Somebody gives a speech that is to Christians. So every other single time in the book of Acts, every single speech or sermon or whatever that's given is either to people who have never heard the story of Christianity or making a defense before authority, before they're going to be beaten or killed or something like that. So this is the only one in the entire book.

And I think Paul's really clear about this in Titus and Timothy, that his words to elders or deacons or whoever, leaders are words to them as exemplars of a ministry that everybody shares in. Everybody's a minister that's a Christian. And so we can look at this passage more generally as well because what Paul's doing here is he's basically teaching us what kind of church he wants us to be, everybody, the ministry that everybody is going to share in as the people of God at different capacities and different levels. And you see that especially in three things, three lessons, there's tons in this passage and we can't do it all, but I just want to draw out three lessons in verse 19, 20 and 21 that are kind of all over the passage that Paul's teaching us. What kind of church should we be? A church that proclaims first that life is meaningful. And then second, a church that testifies to the truth. And then third, a church that loves in tears. So first, the Christian church, one of the missions of the Christian church is to declare to the world that life is meaningful. This is simple, but it's important. It's never been more important to say this that the church exists to declare to the world that life has a purpose, that life has meaning because we live in a world that often and in a modern world that says it doesn't. So if you look in verse 20, Paul says something like this, I did not shrink or hide or neglect from telling you what was helpful, but another word for helpful there, it can also be translated as meaningful. And what he's saying is I didn't tell you everything. I didn't sit there and kind of give you a systematic theology and give you all the details and the nitty gritty of every single doctrine and all that, but I told you what you needed to know to make sense of your life and to give you a purpose for your existence. I told you the central parts of the story, in other words, that would make sense of who you are and why you exist.

And he says it more famously in verse 24 and this is kind of the, this is the ordination verse. Like if you're into an ordination service, you've probably, they've probably preached from verse 24, verse

24, but I do not account my life of any value nor is precious to myself if only I may finish my course in the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. But in other words, what he's saying is that he's asking the question, what makes life precious to you? What makes life sweet or precious or gives you a meaning to get out of bed? And Paul's saying my life is precious because of the ministry that I've been given. The purpose to run a race for something that's bigger than me, bigger than me, bigger than my emotions, bigger than my daily pleasures.

This is what makes life precious and meaningful is, and he says Jesus Christ, the purpose that I've been made for, right? So the church is called to declare purpose and meaning to a modern world that often doesn't think the world has any purpose or meaning. One of the most famous philosophers of the 20th century, Martin Heidegger, a German, said that the 20th century and the 21st century following is an era of the crisis of meaning.

[6 : 26] And so in the ancient world, everybody believed in an ultimate purpose. I mean, even if you didn't believe in Christianity, you believed in some kind of story and a religion and a higher power of some sort that gave your life an ultimate purpose. But in the modern world, one commentator says meaning is an illusion, meaning is an illusion in the popular culture.

And this really became apparent in the 1900s with the development of a type of fiction, a type of literature called nonsense literature. You've all probably read some nonsense literature, even if you didn't know it. The most famous example of nonsense literature is the story of Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. And the purpose of nonsense literature is that the author offers the reader elements of what seems like it's going to be a normal story, a beginning and a middle, and you think there's going to be an end and a conclusion to some kind of problem. But then when you start reading it, you realize like this is craziness, that you can't make sense of it. And the purpose of the development of nonsense literature was to convey an ethic that meaning in life is actually an illusion.

And this didn't start cropping up until the 1900s. Just if you remember the famous scene of Alice with the Cheshire Cat, you know, the Cheshire Cat sitting on the tree, right, everybody has probably at least seen the movie or something. And Alice says to the cat, which way should I go from here? And the cat says, it depends a good deal on where you want to go in this world. And she says, I don't much care where I want to go. And so he says, then it doesn't matter which way you go, does it, right? And that's the central, it doesn't matter which way you go, life is meaningless, it's pointless. But more seriously, Thomas Nagel, who's probably maybe the most famous philosopher alive today at New York University in New York, he wrote a book called What Does It All Mean? Exploring Modern People's Wrestling with the Crisis of Meaning. And this is what he said, for modern people, the grave is the only goal. The grave is the only goal. So it's ridiculous to take our lives seriously. But the problem is that people want more than that. They want a reason to believe that life matters somehow. And so in this passage, Paul warns at the end of verse 28 against the wolves that are going to come in and corrupt the church, if you will. And wolves, of course, in the New Testament is a metaphor, right, for ideas that come in and damage the purposefulness of life, the meaningfulness of life. And there are all sorts of wolves in the New Testament era and all sorts of wolves metaphorically today. But one of the greatest wolves today, I think, is this. And Nagel summarizes it later on in the book. He says this, even if you produce a great work of literature, which continues to be read thousands of years from now, eventually the solar system will cool down or the universe will wind down and it will collapse and all traces of all of your efforts will vanish. And the problem is that although there are justifications for most of the little things and the big things we do in life, none of these explanations can explain the point of your life as a whole.

In the end, it would not matter if you had never existed. And after you've gone out of existence, it won't matter that you did exist. Because that's one of the greatest philosophers in the world explaining the problem of meaning in the modern world. I've offered this before from Leo Tolstoy, Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist who wrote books like War and Peace.

[10 : 08] But he came to a point in his life that kind of exemplifies this dilemma in the modern world, in the modern culture. He was about to commit suicide. And so on the verge of suicide, this is what he wrote. My question, he's reflecting about that experience. My question was the simplest of all questions, lying in the soul of every human being from the littlest child to the wisest elder. It was a question without an answer to which one cannot live as I had found out by experience. It was this, what will come of what I am doing today or do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life differently

expressed the question is this, why should I live? Why wish for anything? Why do anything? It can also be expressed like this, is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy? Every single human being faces three great problems. The problem of guilt that is within you, the things that are bad about you. The problem of suffering and sorrow, the things that are bad outside of you that happen to you. And then ultimately the problem of death, the reversal of all life. And what Paul is saying is that one of the ministries of the church, especially in the 21st century, is to say to the world that life has purpose, that it has meaning, that Christianity actually has an answer to all the great problems of human existence. The problems that drove Leo Tolstoy to almost commit suicide. And here is the solution. Carl Bart, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, was on the cover of Time Magazine, one of two Christian theologians to ever be on the cover of Time Magazine. And the quote at the bottom simply said this, the church's task is to proclaim that the goal of human existence is not death but resurrection.

Everyone wants to live. The goal of human existence is not death but resurrection. And the church exists, that's what makes life precious to proclaim that story, that ministry. And so we'll close this point with C.S. Lewis reflecting on this dilemma. It's always good to end things on C.S. Lewis. He says this, if you accept the story of meaninglessness instead of preciousness in life, you might decide to have a good of a time in this life as possible. The universe is a universe of nonsense, nevertheless. But while you are here, grab what you can. Unfortunately, if you believe this, you can't really be in love with a girl if you know that all the beauties of her person and all her character are a momentary and accidental problem produced by nothing more than the collision of atoms and that your only response to them is something arising from the behavior of your genes. You can't go on getting very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion, that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it. If you are ever inconsistent enough just for a moment to be pushed into real warmth and enthusiasm and joy about life, what you know will force you once again to feel hopeless disharmony between your own emotions and the universe that you think you live in, a meaningless one. Christianity, it says this, we do not simply find life precious in the moments that our emotions tell us it is. Life is precious, it's not meaningless, and the mystery of meaning in the whole universe is a person in verse 24, a person Paul identifies him, Jesus Christ.

So the first point is that the church's ministry and modernity in the modern world is to proclaim that our lives have purpose. Secondly, of three things and these are more brief. Secondly, the Christian ministry, the church's purpose, we're called to testify to the truth. We're called to testify to the truth. So he says this a few times in the passage, you'll look in verse 21. I was testifying to both Jews and Greeks of the truth, repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 20 he uses two verbs to describe that. He says, I preached, or I declared to you, and I taught the church the truth. And then what's the truth? And then in verse 27, I did not shrink from declaring to you, and then he says this, the whole counsel of God. Now Tom Wright, who's up at St. Andrew's says that the word counsel there in the ESV, I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God, is probably better spoken as the whole plan of God because it's a word that actually is used for a narrative or a story. So he's saying I did not shrink from telling you the whole narrative of God, the whole story of God from the beginning to the end. So in other words, what he's saying is that when he conveys the truth to people, he doesn't come in and merely explain doctrines. He doesn't come in and first tell them, let me tell you about justification. He comes in and tells them the story of the beginning to the end with Jesus Christ in the middle. That that's how the church comes in and witnesses to the world by telling the world about a history, about a history. There's a film in 1979 called Hardcore. I don't know if any of you have seen it. I can't technically commend it to you because it has problem portions. But a film called Hardcore, and there's a movie in it. It's about a Presbyterian elder. He is very much a stereotype in this film, if you will, very dour fellow. Not true of any of us, but true of this guy in this film.

And he's in an airport and this girl who's just in Las Vegas, and this girl who's very much from Las Vegas, I mean just has no relationship to him culturally whatsoever. And you can see it in the way she dresses and speaks and everything. She starts asking him questions and she says, they're getting kind of a little bit of an argument. And she says, well, what do you believe in? And he says, I believe in the five points of Calvinism. And she was like, what? And he says, tulip. I believe in tulip. If you don't know what that is, that's okay. I believe in tulip. And so he starts explaining to her, T stands for total depravity in you for unconditional election. And da, da, da. It's from the Cannons of

Dort, 1619.

And then he spends a few minutes in the scene explaining to her the doctrine of predestination, the ancient doctrine. And at the end of the conversation she says, well, it sounds like you've got it all figured out. And of course she's completely put off, right? Paul is saying no to that approach of the Christian witness to the world. The Christian witness to the world is actually to tell a story first before it is to expound doctrine. And that's exactly what is happening all throughout the book of Acts. Paul and Peter, they go through and they tell the story of Jesus Christ and how your life makes sense inside of a story of meaning, a story of death and resurrection. One commentator says it like this, Christianity before it is a proclamation of doctrines is a proclamation first of a history of the history of the world. The Bible is not a book of doctrines, but it is a history, a true story of redemption. Paul is first telling them about God's whole plan from creation to recreation.

[18:14] And only then is he coming back and explaining to the church more specifically in his letters about central doctrines, the great doctrines of the faith that he pulls from the story.

Now, what exactly is the truth that the church is called to testify to? What is the story?

Commentators, I said this at the beginning, but commentators will look at this passage and they'll say that never before has Paul looked so much like Jesus than he actually does here. So you can see that in verse 22. And now behold, I'm 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. And then later on he talks about death, potentially death awaiting him. And so what commentators do is they look at this passage and they say, Paul has never looked so much like Jesus. He's sitting with his disciples, calling them together and giving them a farewell address like the book of John.

And he's saying, I've been called to set my face west towards Jerusalem. In other words, the Holy Spirit is bidding me come and die. And that's what he thinks is going to happen to him in Jerusalem, that he's prepared to go and give up his life. And so he's giving them his final commission, his great commission, if you will, to the Ephesians and elders.

Some commentators say this is Paul's Gethsemane moment. It's him living out the sufferings of Christ in his own sort of Gethsemane moment. And so he looks like Jesus here, but he doesn't. He doesn't. Tim Keller makes this point. Why does he not look like Jesus here? And if you noticed, what's happening is that he's telling people that he loves deeply goodbye and commissioning them, and they're weeping over him. And they're throwing, it says, a thin to passage. Unfortunately, it says they embraced him, but it says literally they flew their arms around his neck. And they're crying for him, and they're begging him not to go, probably. In other words, what he has here is he has a deep community. They kiss him as he goes towards Jerusalem to face his death. Paul's Gethsemane moment. It's not like Jesus' Gethsemane moment. When Jesus was facing death in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was afraid. He was human. He was a human being. He is a human being, and he was afraid. And he came to his friends, his disciples, and he said, will you come with me for just a moment and pray? Because I can't face this by myself. And he says in Luke 22, my soul is overcome with sorrow. Jesus said, will you stay with me through the night? Will you send me as friends or sending Paul here?

[21:33] He was human. And he needed pastoral care. He needed pastoral love. And what happened? They all fell asleep. Paul was sent to suffer in Jerusalem with kisses of love. And Jesus Christ, the only kiss that he got was the kiss of betrayal. Paul looks like Jesus here, but he doesn't. You see? And the difference is that Paul has a deep community sending him into the sufferings of ministry, and Jesus was alone. He had no friends. He had no loving community. His disciples hid from him. They were ashamed. And when he was on the cross, his father turned his face away in wrath. He was completely alone. The difference in Jesus and his people in this Gethsemane moment is that Jesus Christ died so that you would never have to be alone in the midst of your sufferings. We are like him, but we aren't in that way. And so this is the story. This is the story that you are called to go and testify to. And so we'll just close with a very brief final point. Lastly, the church then is called to minister, to love, and tears. Jesus Christ died in ultimate loneliness so that Paul and every other believer called to minister after Jesus would never have to.

And that means that the church is called into deep community, to minister and love in tears. That's the word here for deep community. You see it all over the place in this chapter.

In verse 19, he says, I serve the Lord with all humility and with tears. And then in verse 37, as he departed, there was much weeping for him. In verse 38, they wrapped their arms around his neck.

They were affectionate for him. And then in verse 25, he told them, I know that none of you will ever see me again. And the problem with how fast the book of Acts moves is that you can't quite see how emotional this scene was on the service of the text and how much they loved each other. The only way I could think to illustrate it was from the story of John Patton, the great missionary, the Scottish missionary to the New Hebrides. John Patton wrote his own autobiography and he left in 1858 for the New Hebrides to minister to people who were cannibals at the time. And Patton describes in this just, get the book because it's like reading Indiana Jones missionary stories. I mean, it's amazing.

But Patton describes as he's about to leave to go to Glasgow. He was in a village somewhere, I think, pretty far east in Scotland. He's walking to Glasgow for training and he thinks, he and his father both think that they'll never see each other again. And he's just a young man and he lived every day of his life so far with his father. This is what he writes, suspecting that they would never see each other again. My dear father walked with me the first six miles of the way. Tears rolled down my cheeks as freely now as they did then as my memory steals me away to the scene. For the last half mile or so, we walked on together in unbroken silence. My father, as was often his custom, carried his hat in his hand while his long flowing yellow hair streamed like a girl's down to his shoulders. Now there's a scene. He was a Presbyterian elder in the 19th century with blonde hair down to his shoulders. His lips kept moving in silent prayers from me and his tears fell fast when our eyes met each other in looks for which all speech was now vain. We halted on reaching the appointed parting place.

He grasped my hand firmly for a moment and there was silence. And then solemnly and affectionately he said, God bless you, my son. Although he tried, he was unable to say more. His lips kept moving but no words came out and I knew it was silent prayer. And tears we embraced and parted. I ran off as fast as I could and went about to turn a corner in the road where he would lose sight of me. I looked back and I saw him standing there with his head uncovered where I had left him, waving my hat in a dew. I was around the corner and I hid out of sight in an instant. But my heart was too full to carry me any farther so I darted into the side of the road and I wept for a season. And after hiding, I looked back up for him and I saw him in blinding tears off in the distance. He was looking for me but he could not find me.

[26 : 42] But I could see him even now as an old man the scene arises vividly before my mind as it had been but one hour ago. A beautiful story of departure. We don't experience things like this today because of FaceTime and Skype but this is what's happening in Acts 20. And they have deep affection for one another because Jesus Christ had died to create deep community. And so we'll just close by saying this. The church is called not only to declare that there is purpose to existence, that there is truth to testify to the truth but also to be a community of tears.

And tears is simply a specific term in this passage that describes a condition of the heart, a condition that can be broken for other people's sorrows and griefs. So I want to ask you men especially you white, I think exclusively white, Scottish, English, Welsh, Irish, American, Western, European peoples, are you able to cry for other people? Are you able to weep with those who weep? Or at least are you able to have your heart broken over the sorrows of others in this life as a Christian community? And so one of the great evidences of being changed by the gospel I think especially for men in the Western world is that you grow into crying more or at least into having deep affection at looking out at the sorrows of the world. And we said this before here and I'll close with this but Christians are the happiest people and the saddest people on earth for that reason. Why? Because when you have a hard, hard heart before you see the gospel, you don't care about other people's problems. So all you're worried about is your own problems.

But when you have a heart of stone that becomes a heart of flesh because you believe what Jesus has done for you and a new purpose of existence, then you start to care a lot more about what's happening in other people's lives and you start to weep with those who weep as the New Testament says and rejoice with those who rejoice. Everybody's happiness becomes your happiness, everybody's sorrow becomes your sorrow. And so Christians are the happiest and the saddest people on earth. Soft hearts make deep sorrows and true joys at the very same time. So if you have faith that Jesus Christ walked out of the grave and then you are a Christian minister in the church, what kind of a church does Paul want us to be in this passage? Called to proclaim that life has purpose to the world, called to testify to the true story of Jesus Christ and called to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice.

Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would make all of us into people who are soft. And we know that the only way is that we believe in the gospel. So we ask now that for those who are exploring the mysteries of the faith, the gospel, Jesus Christ died and rose again for sin in our place for the first time, that they would be helped by your spirit to believe that and for those of us that have known this, traced for some time, that we would be once again reshaped and reoriented by it. We ask for this in Jesus' name. Amen.