

“TO CARE FOR THE CHURCH OF GOD”

Acts 20:13–38

Key Verse: 20:28

“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.”

How do you feel about church? Some have no experience with it. Most are indifferent. For some, it's a trigger. Others keep their participation at a minimum. Some shop around to find a church that fits. Others are suspicious. The Book of Acts shows us how to live as witnesses of Jesus. But his witnesses don't stay away from church, or only try to be with non-believers. His witnesses, Paul says, “care for” the church of God. Paul himself sets the example. To actually care, first we need to know, what is “the church of God”? What does it mean to really “care for” it? And why should we all do so? May God speak to us through his word.

Paul has just made an intense trip (map 1). Originally he planned to sail from Corinth to Syria, perhaps to get to Jerusalem by Passover, but due to a plot by the Jews, he changed plans and took his team with him on foot to all the churches in Macedonia (3), adding several more weeks to his trip. He spent Passover in Philippi without the team, then joined them in Troas (6). There, he spent all day, and all night, sharing the gospel with people (7–12). Now he decides to go by himself by land to Assos (image of road). By boat, which had to go around the peninsula, it's a 40-mile trip in rough waters. But by land, it's a 30-mile straight shot walking on a Roman road. Paul needs this time alone to pray and gain strength and wisdom, before he makes this hard trip to Jerusalem.

Look at verses 14–15. Paul rejoins the team at Assos and sails with them from there.¹ They're sailing to each place, one new place per day, staying overnight and sailing away in the morning (map). These places, some of them on picturesque islands, are all along the stunning coastline of the Aegean Sea in today's Western Turkey, and they were all famous in the ancient world. Assos (image) had a steep hill, directly above the sea, with a Greek temple at the top,

¹ The word “we” appears again. There are several “we” sections in Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16), where the author Luke joins Paul and his team; these sections are usually a travel log.

built around 530 BC. It was like a beacon for ships, and later became a center for the philosophies of Aristotle and the Stoics. *Mitylene* (image), capital of the large island of Lesbos, began around 1000 BC. It was well-known for its art, culture, trade, beautiful architecture, and theater. *Chios* (image), a wealthy island with snow-covered mountains, was known for its coins, red wine, mastic gum, and marble. The island of *Samos* (image), birthplace of the Greek mathematician Pythagoras, had a temple and a tunnel that were marvels of ancient Greek engineering. *Miletus* (image) was also settled by the Greeks around 1000 BC. It was actually where early Greek philosophy and science were born. It came to have great wealth, a navy, and began many colonies of its own around the Black Sea. In Paul's day Miletus was a major commercial and cultural port for Rome. Paul's young team members may be impressed to visit these beautiful, historic places. But Paul has something far more beautiful, and history-making: the gospel of Jesus and his eternal kingdom. He wants to share this good news with people in all these places. And there's something else on his mind. He wants to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost, so he's not stopping even at Ephesus (16), just 20 miles away. Still, Paul wants to see its church elders in person. Look at verse 17. Paul is probably praying for them, that they might spread the gospel of Jesus to people in all these coastal cities. In Acts, this speech to the Ephesian elders is the only one addressed to a Christian audience. Paul's words here are full of content, and have so many timeless lessons. But mainly they show us how Paul cared for the church, and why he's now asking its elders to care for it.

Because his opponents are working against him, Paul begins his speech by defending his ministry. Read verses 18–19. Paul's care for the church in Ephesus began, from the first day, with his "serving the Lord." All that he did for people there, he was doing for Jesus. His care for them was rooted in his love for Jesus. These elders knew in person how Paul served "with all humility and with tears." What is "all humility"? Paul was humble before Jesus and before people, and humble to do all kinds of tasks. They also knew he served "with tears" because of the grace of Jesus in his life. His tears showed his empathy, sharing in people's sufferings. And they knew he shed many tears because he so earnestly wanted his own people, the Jews, to repent and believe in Jesus. They saw how Paul, to keep people from going astray, pleaded with them with tears (31). Read verse 20. They witnessed his diligence, teaching in both public spaces and private homes. He was helping people build and deepen their faith

based on sound doctrine.² Twice he says he did not “shrink from declaring” it (20,27). These elders knew Paul boldly spoke even the hard truths, like the wrath of God against sin, and people’s need to repent and change their lifestyle. They knew he spoke the truth to them in love (Eph.4:15). Read verse 21. Without favoritism, he invited everyone to repentance toward God, and faith in Jesus. He cared so much, he wanted every single person to experience the grace of Jesus.

Next, he tells the elders why he’s on this trip. Read verses 22–23. Everywhere he stopped, beginning in Macedonia, and now on this voyage, the Holy Spirit has been warning Paul of what lay ahead. Why is he going to Jerusalem? He’s “constrained by” the Spirit, or “bound by” the Spirit. It’s the Holy Spirit who set Paul apart to go out from Antioch as a missionary (13:2). It’s the Holy Spirit who first kept him from going to this province of Asia and instead sent him to Macedonia (16:6). It’s the Holy Spirit who gave him the vision to go to Rome (19:21). Now it’s the Holy Spirit telling Paul he first has to go to Jerusalem, though imprisonment and afflictions await him there. The Ephesian elders need to see that Paul is going to Jerusalem not with his own ideas, but in obedience to the Holy Spirit. If we’re going to live as Jesus’ witnesses today, we need to learn to listen to the Holy Spirit and obey him, no matter how hard it may be.

Then Paul shares his personal mission statement. Read verse 24. Many people are obsessed with preserving their lives in this world, for as long as possible. But Paul isn’t trying to hold onto the world or preserve his life. If need be, he’s ready to lose his life for Jesus. The word “course” is literally “race” (2 Tim.4:7). Paul is not running around doing his own thing, whatever he likes. He’s out to finish the race of faith Jesus gave him, the ministry Jesus entrusted to him. He’s on mission, in obedience to our Lord Jesus. And what’s his mission? He says, “...to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (24b). Throughout the Book of Acts this “grace” is available to everyone.³ Paul mentions this “grace” twice here (24,32). What is this “grace”? Paul writes: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight...” (Eph.1:7–8). “...so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...”

² 1 Tim.1:10; 6:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1.

³ 4:33; 6:8; 11:23; 13:43; 14:3,26; 15:11,40; 18:27.

(Eph.2:7–8). Paul has shared this good news of the grace of God with both the self-righteous and the sinful. Now he's going to Jerusalem to testify to this same grace, even though they're unlikely to accept it. It needs to be our same message today. Every day we need to be living by this grace, and talking about this grace.

Then Paul tells the elders a hard truth. Read verse 25. He's been helping them know the living hope of the kingdom, but he senses he'll never see them again—not because he'll die soon, but because God wants him to go to Rome. So, at this last chance to speak with them in person, what does he say? Read verses 26–27. Paul takes his ministry seriously. He's like the prophet Ezekiel, who warned his people of God's impending judgment (Eze.33:1–9). Paul fulfilled his solemn duty to tell people everything God showed him. He didn't shrink back from declaring to them “the whole counsel of God.” What is this? The word “counsel” literally means “plan, purpose, or will” (Eph.1:9–11). Paul declared to them *God's will, God's purpose, God's plan, God's counsel*, all fulfilled perfectly in Jesus. And it's for the people of the whole world. It's everything essential for salvation, spiritual growth and maturity. Paul declared the whole counsel of God as a holy duty before God, and out of deep love for those people. He's urging the elders to hold onto it and do the same.

Then he gets to his point. Read verse 28. A church leader's primary duty is to pay careful attention to himself and to all the flock. To care for others I first need to care for myself. Care for what? Not just for my physical or human needs, but for my soul. How's my relationship with Jesus?⁴ Is my faith real or fake, close and vibrant, or distant and stale? Jesus is the one inviting us, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt.11:28–29). As we come to him, receive his rest, and keep learning his gentle, lowly heart, we can take his yoke and really care for his flock. Paul says it's not an appointment or an election by man, but the Holy Spirit who made these men “overseers.” “Overseer” means to look at, examine, inspect, or visit. This can't be done at a safe distance, or superficially. Like a doctor who carefully examines and diligently visits his patients, overseers need to vigilantly check in on people to help them get personally closer to Jesus. Elders need to regard this task as their most holy duty, and do it before the eyes of God.

⁴ 2 Cor.13:5a; Luke 21:34.

Paul uses the phrase “all the flock.” He means both Jews and Gentiles, all the diverse people who belong to Jesus in that community. To care for them all depends on how we see them. Usually we see people based on whether or not they are close to me. If we don’t feel close, we ignore them. Or we see their human background, personality, or problems, and decide whether or not to get involved. But we need to see all our fellow believers as “all the flock.” Whatever their sins or flaws, these people are not optional, but so precious and valuable to God. They are not *our* sheep, but *his*. As Jesus’ witnesses, we don’t care for people based on *our* preferences, but for *their* sake, and ultimately, for *Jesus’* sake. It’s how Paul saw people, how these elders should see people, and how all witnesses of Jesus should see people. It’s not a selfish or business mentality, but a shepherd’s mentality. The word “to care” here literally means “to shepherd.” Our Lord Jesus said a real shepherd “cares” for the sheep (John 10:13). Instead of analyzing, or talking too much, we should ask ourselves, “Do I really *care*?” People don’t want to be used for a program; they want someone to truly care.

Paul says, “...to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (28). How do we “care for the church”? Yes we should care about its finances, its buildings, its programs, its online presence, its spiritual heritage, its integrity, its reputation. But above all, we should care for the *people* of the church. God’s truth is, real-life believers are “the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” We need to repent of seeing them humanly, and see them in light of this gospel truth: Jesus bought them with his own blood. The church is made up of people who’ve accepted his blood. Paul shows us how to care for people bought by the blood of Jesus. He gives them the whole counsel of God. He diligently visits, teaches, prays, warns, and even weeps. In our culture people only care about themselves and their families. It’s like a reflex, a bad habit. But a real church of Jesus is a place where his witnesses truly care for all the people of God in it. We may not feel anything for them at first. But we can start by praying. Then God opens our hearts to start caring. Shepherding people means to not let even one of them perish or be lost.⁵ We need God’s strength and God’s grace to start truly caring for people, and to be truly praying for them.

As a shepherd Paul shares another sobering truth. Look at verses 29–30. At that time the “fierce wolves” and those speaking “twisted things” were insisting

⁵ Matt.18:14; Luke 15:4; 19:10.

on rules and laws instead of the grace of Jesus.⁶ Today they may also be those who teach cheap grace, or Christianity based on performance, or Christian life focused on the self. It's a serious matter. Read verse 31. Those who truly care for the church are shepherds who protect the flock from such people and their false doctrines. With such a dangerous future, how could Paul and these elders have hope? Read verse 32. Paul himself will no longer be with them. They themselves are not enough for the task, in many ways. But Paul commits them to God, by faith. He also commits them to the word of his grace. This refers to Bible study, done not for its own sake, but to lead people to Jesus. Paul is convinced that this "word of his grace" is what will truly help them. The word of his grace is able to build them up. The word of his grace is able to give them their heavenly inheritance. The word of his grace is able to sanctify them. To care for the people of the church, we need to focus on the ministry of the word—not just activities, or fellowship, but the word of his grace, the gospel of Jesus found in the Bible.

Paul concludes by again sharing his own example (33–35). Church leaders need to live exemplary, giving lives. In Ephesus, as elsewhere, Paul worked with his own hands as a tentmaker to support himself and those with him. He didn't envy people's money or apparel. He wasn't looking for gifts; he was looking for ways to give, to help the weak, to live by the example of Jesus. It's not just for leaders; all witnesses of Jesus need to learn the blessed life of giving instead of receiving. When our hearts are moved to give, we can truly care for the church.

So, how do you feel about church? Is it irrelevant to you? A place just to get something, or where I struggle to fit in, or where I'm burdened? Read verse 28 again. May God grant us new eyes to see the church of God as "all the flock," people bought with the blood of Jesus, and may he give us a new heart to truly care for them.

⁶ For example, see Gal.2:16; 3:1–6,24–25; 5:1–6; Rom.3:20–24; 7:4–6.