Be Shepherds of the Church of God

Acts 20:1-38

Key Verse:20:28 “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.”

This world is still in danger because of COVID-19. We thank God who has healed those who are sick and protected his people from the virus. Today we’ll continue to study the book of Acts. In today’s passage Paul’s third missionary journey is concluded with his farewell speech to the elders of the Ephesus Church. Through his farewell speech we learn how affectionately Paul served the church of God. I pray that we may learn Paul’s affection for the church of God and follow his good example as a shepherd for God’s flock of sheep.

First, Paul’s ministry at Troas (1-12) While Paul stayed in the city of Ephesus for two and half years, there was great work of the Holy Spirit in the city. Many people repented of their sins and burned their scrolls which they practiced for sorcery. The word of God spread widely and grew in power (19:20). But Satan became jealous of Paul’s ministry and stirred up the heart of a silversmith to persecute Paul. By the help of a city clerk the uproar ended and Paul left for Macedonia (20:1) According to verses1-6 we don’t have any special report about Paul’s ministry in Macedonia while he stayed there for three months. But we learned of the main purpose of Paul’s revisit to Macedonia through other epistles he wrote. He went there to collect the contribution, the gift money, for the poor believers in Jerusalem Church. In AD 45-47 there was a severe famine in the entire Roman world. (Acts 11:28) There were many people who starved to death in the land of Syria. So, Paul collected the contribution from the Antioch Church and brought them to Jerusalem Church during the Jerusalem Council in chapter 11.(Ac 11:29) This is like our St. Louis UBF Church collecting relief money and sending it to the overseas missionaries who are suffering from financial difficulties because of the pandemic.

Paul traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece. According to 2 Corinthians (7:5;8:1;9:4), Paul wrote 2 Corinthians while he stayed in Macedonia, probably in Philippi, and sent the letter to Corinth through Titus. (2 Co 8;17) Paul wrote the second letter to the Corinthian Church so that he might comfort the suffering believers and encourage them to complete their contribution which they had vowed before. Not long after he wrote this letter, Paul visited Corinth, where he wrote the Romans. It was around AD 57. Even though he stayed in Greece for only three months, he wrote the two great letters, 2 Corinthians and Romans, while he was there with his seven disciples. Because Paul learned that there was a plot against him, he sent the seven disciples ahead of him to Troas, where he joined them later.

Troas was the city where Paul saw God’s vision of a Macedonian during his second missionary journey. At that time Paul wanted to go to the district of Asia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow him. That night Paul saw a vision of a Macedonian, who begged him saying, “*Come over to Macedonia and help us*.” (16:9). After seeing this vision, Paul and his companion turned from Asia to Macedonia, the gate for Europe. It was Paul’s second visit to Troas. Paul intended to leave for Jerusalem before the Pentecost, so he taught the word until midnight. One young man named Eutychus fell down from the third floor while he was listening to Paul’s lecture because Paul’s message was long and he was too tired. Paul’s message sounded like lullaby to him. Immediately Paul went down and put his arms around him saying, “***Don’t be alarmed. He is alive!***” (10) Then he went upstairs again as if nothing happened, and continued teaching until midnight. Paul raised Eutychus at Troas as Peter raised Tabitha in Joppa (Ac 9:40) There was no break or vacation in the work of salvation. Paul did not waste even a minute, but used his hour to preach the word. He wrote two great books-2 Corinthians and Romans- during his mission trip. He taught the word until midnight. Can we learn something from Paul? I learned the attitude as a gospel worker. Do not waste even a minute, but use the rest of your life for his glory! Amen. Jesus said in John 5:17, “*My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working*.” Jesus worked hard as the Father did. Paul worked hard as Jesus did. Paul put Eutychus’ life in God’s hands and left for Jerusalem the next day. The young man Eutychus came back alive. (12)

Second, be shepherds of the church of God (13-31) On the way to Jerusalem Paul stopped by Miletus, the port city around 35 miles south from Ephesus. From Miletus, Paul asked the elders of the church of Ephesus to come to him. (17) Paul did not want to spend time in Ephesus even though Ephesus was one of the most successful cities during his second missionary journey. Paul did not delay his journey at Ephesus, as he wanted to reach Jerusalem before the Pentecost. (16) Paul was carrying the contribution which he had collected from Macedonia. Verses18-35 shows Paul’s farewell speech to the elders of Ephesus. In his farewell speech we learn Paul’s affection for the Ephesus Church. How did Paul serve the believers in the church? Look at verses 19-21. “***I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.***” Paul served them with great humility and with tears. What Paul did for the church reminds us of Jesus who served sinners with great humility and tears. Even though Jesus was the Son, he did not consider himself equal to God, but humbled himself, made himself nothing, and appeared as a man. He served his sheep with tears until he sacrificed his life for his sheep. (Php 2:5-11, Jn 10:11) Paul used to be a proud self-righteous persecutor. He had persecuted the church of God. But Jesus visited Paul first, forgave his sin, and called him to work for his sheep. Paul confessed his letter to Corinth, saying, “*By the grace of God I am what I am*.” (1 Cor 15:10) Paul remembered God’s grace, so he served the church as Jesus served him-with great humility and tears. There are several Bible teachers among us. I witnessed how they served their students with humility and sincerity. They could do so because they remembered God’s grace upon them. Tears symbolize Paul’s affection for his sheep and his perseverance in serving them. We need humility and tears in serving each other.

In verses 22-24 we learn Paul’s resolution for God’s mission. Through the warning of the Holy Spirit Paul knew that his visit to Jerusalem accompanied prison and hardships. What was Paul’s resolution despite the upcoming dangers? Let us read verse 24. “***However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace***.” What is the most important and valuable thing for men? Isn’t it life? But Paul considered testifying to the good news of God’s grace more important and valuable than his life. In his letter to the Philippi Church he said the same, “*But whatever were gains to me I know consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage that I may gain Christ.* (Php 3:7,8) He also said, “*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*.” (Php 1:21) As for Paul, death for Christ is more important and valuable than anything on this earth, including his life. Why did Paul consider testifying the good news of God’s grace more important than his life? This was because it was the gospel of God’s grace for salvation. Paul said in Romans 1:16, “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes…*” Paul shared God’s broken heart for the lost world. Paul wanted to share God’s love and grace with those who were perishing. Do you share God’s broken heart for the lost souls? Do you want to share the good news of God’s grace with those who are perishing? Paul’s testimony invites all of us to run the race of faith as Bible teacher and missionary by sharing the good news of God’s grace.

In verses 25-32 Paul gives the elders several commands as overseers and shepherds of the church. In fact, the words ‘elder’, ‘overseer’ and ‘pastor’ have the same meaning in Greek. We learn Paul’s three commands for them: First, be on your guard. Second, be shepherds of God’s church. Third, be imitators of my shepherd life. Paul knew that church persecution was coming in from the outside and apostasy from the inside (29,30). Satan will attack God’s sheep like savaging wolves to scatter them away. So Paul said in verse 28. “***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.***” He continued in verse 31. “***So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears***.” Paul urged the elders to be shepherds of God’s sheep. Here the church of God is God’s flock of sheep. Shepherds are those who protect their sheep and provide food and guide them towards the right path. Jesus is the good shepherd of God’s sheep. Jesus said, “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*” (Jn 10:11) Jesus died on the cross and shed his blood to protect his sheep, to purchase them, and to provide them with eternal life. Jesus was the good shepherd for Paul. Paul knew that he was saved by the blood of his shepherd Jesus. So Paul encouraged the elders to be shepherds of God’s church. Paul showed a good example how to serve his sheep as a good shepherd. He served the church with great humility and tears night and day. Paul followed Jesus’ example as a shepherd. Paul urged the elders to follow his example as a shepherd.

Third, it is more blessed to give than to receive (32-38). In verses 32-35 Paul displayed a good example of a self-supporting missionary and shepherd. Look at verses 33-35. “***I have not coveted any one’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, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive***.” As we know in 18:3, Paul worked as a tent-maker to support himself and his ministry. He was a full-time worker as well as a fulltime preacher. He did not depend on his church for financial needs, but solved it by working hard as a tentmaker. He explained this in 1 Thessalonians 3:7-10. “*For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.*” According to these verses Paul worked hard night and day in order to show a good example of a self-supporting missionary and not to give any burden to his church. UBF church was established in 1961and has been as known as a self-supporting campus ministry. We missionaries and Bible teachers here work full time as computer programmers, doctors, nurses, store managers, professors, and so on, and teach the Bible. I also used to work as a handyman, a modern tentmaker. We work and we teach. We follow Paul’s example as self-supporting minister. No one is idle among us.

What does it mean when Jesus said, “*It is more blessed to give than to receive*” in verse 35? At that time Paul was carrying the contribution for the poor in Jerusalem church. He collected the relief money from the churches in Macedonia. He praised the generosity of the Macedonian churches. He said in 2 Corinthians 8, “*In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.*” (2 Cor 8:2-5) The Christians in the Macedonian Church were not rich at all. They were very poor. But they were willing to give and were happy to join in the relief fund for the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem because they knew that it is more blessed to give than to receive. They knew that the joy of giving is more than the joy of receiving. People like receiving, especially free gifts. But the Lord Jesus said that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Here the word blessed is the same with happy. When we give even in the midst of difficulty, we are more blessed and happier than we receive. God is the God who gives. For God so loved the world that he GAVE, not received, his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (Jn 3:16) God gave, sacrificed, his Only Son and let him die on the cross for our sins. Jesus gave his life. God loves a cheerful giver.(2 Cor 9:6-7) Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of us should give what we decide in our heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. Because the coronavirus struck the world, numerous people lost their jobs and are suffering from financial difficulty. Despite this pandemic our church participates in the relief fund for the suffering overseas missionaries. We are happy when we receive stimulus checks. But we are happier when we give our heart and contribution for the suffering brothers and sisters. May God richly bless those who give and those who receive!

In conclusion after Paul finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. They wept, thinking they would never see Paul again. What a beautiful *Koionia* it is among the brothers in Christ! May God make our church such a beautiful *Koionia* and shepherds of God’s flock of sheep! Amen.