

The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it – but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”

Vance Havner

Text

Acts 20:16-38

Topic

The apostle Paul warns the elders of the church at Ephesus that God’s spiritual flock will be attacked by predators

Title

Elder vs. Predator

Acts 20:16 For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost.

Acts 20:17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.

Acts 20:18 And when they had come to him, he said to them: "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you,

Acts 20:19 serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews;

Acts 20:20 how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house,

Acts 20:21 testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 20:22 And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there,

Acts 20:23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me.

Acts 20:24 But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Acts 20:25 "And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more.

Acts 20:26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I *am* innocent of the blood of all *men*.

Acts 20:27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.

Acts 20:28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Acts 20:29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

Acts 20:30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

Acts 20:31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

Acts 20:32 "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Acts 20:33 I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.

Acts 20:34 Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me.

Acts 20:35 I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, '**It is more blessed to give than to receive.**' "

Acts 20:36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

Acts 20:37 Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him,

Acts 20:38 sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.

Introduction

- being changed to bring change -

"Danger, Will Robinson!"

Recognize that? It's from the classic 1960s television series *Lost in Space*. The series followed the adventures of the Robinson family that is shipwrecked on an alien world after getting lost trying to reach the Alpha Centauri star system. The phrase characterized the relationship between two of its regular characters, the Robot and young Will Robinson. The robot took a protective attitude toward Will and alerted him to dangerous situations.

It's become a popular catch-phrase in everyday American culture. Now and then you'll hear it on TV or in a movie. You might even say

it yourself. If you do it's proper to flail your arms because the Robot would spin and flail his arms when warning young Will.¹

You can almost see the apostle Paul flailing his arms as we read these verses. They are a warning that there is danger ahead in your walk with the Lord. To emphasize the danger Paul employed two metaphors. He depicts you *racing* amidst danger and *grazing* among danger.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 As A Christian You Are Racing Through Obstacles, and #2 As A Church We Are Grazing Among Predators.

#1 As A Christian You Are Racing Through Obstacles

(v16-27)

Paul compared his life with Jesus to a race in several of his writings.² There are different types of races: sprints, marathons, and long distance come to mind. **So should an obstacle course!**

The course he described in these opening verses was full of obstacles.

Acts 20:16 For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost.

- being changed to bring change -
Paul had determined to go to **Jerusalem** and (hopefully) arrive before **Pentecost**. He made a tough decision to **sail past Ephesus**.

We can identify a first obstacle on his course. It is what has been called "the tyranny of the urgent" ever since the essay with that title was written by Charles Hummel in 1967. The danger is letting the *urgent* things crowd out the more or the most *important* things. The issue, Hummel said, is not so much a shortage of time as a problem of priorities.

Hummel saw the secret of Jesus' life and work for God in that "He

¹ Despite the popularity of the phrase it was only said once on the show.

² First Corinthians 9:24; Second Timothy 4:7; Hebrews 12:1

prayerfully waited for His Father's instructions." Hummel quotes P. T. Forsyth, "The worst sin is prayerlessness."

Urgency can be an obstacle on your course. Hurdle it with prayer.

Acts 20:17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.

Acts 20:18 And when they had come to him, he said to them: "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you,

Acts 20:19 serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews;

The **elders** were the spiritual leaders of the church at Ephesus. The term 'elder' indicates their Christian maturity and character. In a moment they will be called both **overseers** and **shepherds**. **Overseer** describes their role; **shepherd**, derived from the word *pastor*, describes their responsibility.

Obstacle number two was mentioned: **Trials**. In Paul's case the trials were **the plotting of the Jews** against him. He said the trials evoked many **tears**. But they did not knock him off course.

Your course will include **trials**. You stay on course by going through them **with all humility**. It means you humble yourself to submit to the Lord and understand that the trials on your course have been personally designed for you by a loving and faithful Savior.

Acts 20:20 how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house,

Acts 20:21 testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul was called by God to preach and teach **repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ**. It's a summary of the Gospel – the Good News of salvation.

At least two more obstacles can be identified in Paul's comments:

1. He got kicked out of the local synagogues. He overcame it and kept on course by teaching **publicly and from house to house**.

2. His audience was both **Jews** and **Greeks** (Gentiles). Cultural differences were an obstacle he overcame by becoming all things to all men.

Acts 20:22 And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there,

Acts 20:23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me.

Would you have gone to **Jerusalem**? The obstacle here is fear. But Paul had a greater fear of the Lord and was able to stay on course.

Skip verse twenty-four for a moment and look at verse twenty-five:

Acts 20:25 "And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more.

There is a sadness that you can almost feel as you read this. That kind of strong emotion can be an obstacle. It can halt you along your course as you give in to personal desires rather than press forward with the Lord.

Acts 20:26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I *am* innocent of the blood of all *men*.

Acts 20:27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.

If someone died without knowing Jesus it was not because Paul had slacked-off in his mission or ministry. It was on account of their own rejection of the Lord's free offer of salvation. One obstacle we could discuss is the hardness of hearts among those whom you serve the Lord as His missionary.

I think you get the idea. One of the races you are in is an obstacle course. *But take heart!* We read (looking back in verse twenty-four):

Acts 20:24 But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Sprinters end gasping for breath. Marathon runners often collapse just past the finish. Long distance and obstacle courses can leave

you fatigued and with a variety of injuries. Still a dedicated runner finishes his or her course.

How much more should we press on for the Lord! The key is to not **count** your **life dear** to yourself. It's not a death-wish. I think Paul had in mind the idea that your life is not your own. It belongs to Jesus. You are dear to the Lord and He has designed a course for you. He is waiting at the end. He has promised to complete the work He has begun in you and that is why you will **finish** with **joy**.

#2 As A Church We Are Grazing Among Predators (v28-38)

Mr. Metaphor changed his thoughts from racing to **grazing**. Paul presented the church as God's **flock** of sheep. The **elders** he was addressing were overseeing it as its **shepherds**.

Acts 20:28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

The church is not just a gathering of people by their choice for their benefit. It is a place where those whom **God** has **purchased with His own blood** come together.

The church is not organized or administrated according to the ways of the world. The Holy Spirit administrates it by giving it gifted men to lead it and guide it in dependence upon Him.

Shepherds and **flock** are out in the field and in danger of vicious predators. **Take heed to yourselves** is a warning that many attacks will be directed against the shepherds. Strike the shepherd and the sheep are scattered and more vulnerable.

Acts 20:29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

Acts 20:30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

Some would attack from outside the flock, like **wolves**. But others would be right in their midst.

Church is a very dangerous place. Maybe you shouldn't be part of the church? That's not really an option. Stay with the metaphor. The predators will pick you off easier if you are alone and without the protection of **shepherds** and the **flock**.

Predators are described a little in verses thirty-three through thirty-five:

Acts 20:33 I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.

Acts 20:34 Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me.

Acts 20:35 I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, **'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'** "

Paul used himself as an example so they would recognize the predators by comparison. They would be men who took advantage of God's people for their own personal gain.

In other passages Paul teaches that it's OK for a missionary or minister to receive support. In fact, it's better for the saints of God. His point here is to contrast himself to the predators that were coming. He labored tirelessly putting the ministry first. He was all about the flock. The predators would put themselves first and be all about taking advantage of the generosity of the believers.

Paul mentioned some words of Jesus that do not appear anywhere in the Gospels, **It is more blessed to give than to receive**. Jesus said and did a lot of things that are not recorded for us. This saying made it into the book of Acts and is thus part of the inspired text.

How do we protect ourselves from the ever-present danger of predation? Go back to verse thirty-one.

Acts 20:31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

The first line of protection is your leadership. They must, among their other duties, **watch** and **warn**. They must do it around the clock.

Earlier the **tears** Paul shed were for his personal trials. Here they were shed for the flock. The tears were in the context of his

warnings. It means he cried over the ruin of the lives of those who would not heed God's warnings.

Your leaders are men who watch over you 24/7; they are subject to severe trials on account of the ministry; they are the first line of defense against vicious predators whom they must battle using only spiritual resources like **humility**; and whether they visibly cry all the time or not they always have plenty to cry about. Where do I sign-up!

Paul does give them a word of encouragement in verse thirty-two:

Acts 20:32 "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

These men, and God's church through them, have **the word of His grace**. **Word** here doesn't refer only to the Bible. It means they have God's personal promise, the way you give someone your word. Only in this case it's God giving His word and He is infinitely faithful.

God has given them His word that **grace** will **build [them] up** while they remain shepherds on earth. They can count on a sufficient supply of every necessary spiritual resource to accomplish their work in the church.

God's **grace** will also **give [them] an inheritance among all those who are sanctified**. **Sanctified** means *set apart*. It's another way of understanding the church on earth. It consists of all those whom Jesus has saved and then set apart as His own dearly beloved.

The shepherds are part of that **sanctified** group. They also can count on a special **inheritance** when they get to Heaven for their faithful service. Sort of like a special account only available to pastors!

One final snapshot is given:

Acts 20:36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

Acts 20:37 Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him,

Acts 20:38 sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.

Some moments are more emotional than others. All moments among the saints should be laying the groundwork for those few moments that are more emotional. In other words we should be growing in our love one for another as those beloved of Jesus Christ.

When you get saved you are set on a custom designed course that will take you through this life on earth to Heaven with the greatest possibility of growth and reward. When it seems you are on an obstacle course **it's because you are!** Stay on course.

Your course always involves participation in the church in relationships with other believers. In your church shepherds watch for your soul as they feed and lead you through many personal and public perils.

Race and graze in grace!

