

clothing from them (verse 33). He had done all of this, so that he might give them an example. It was not because he was obliged to - but so that he might lay down a mark for them to reach towards (verse 35). He freely gave himself, so that they might do the same. He was passing on the example of the Lord Jesus, who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

If the apostle went to such great efforts, then we ought to be sure that the truth here is an important one. It is something very near to the Saviour's own heart. There will always be believers in the world, who we can help, who need us to lend a hand. Today, many hundreds and thousands of brethren are cruelly persecuted in the Muslim world, and discriminated against in many ways. Because of their faithfulness to Christ, they must take the lowest jobs, and lose a great many of their rights. Many believers too are caught up in the wars and disasters that go on in the world. Often, when such things happen, they are the last in the queue to receive any help, because they are outsiders through their faith in Christ. They have nobody to help them, unless we do. The Lord has commanded us to do so, and will hold us to account if we do not. The first missionary went to great lengths to impress this truth upon the first believers. The Holy Spirit has caused the record of it to be kept for us, so that we might take it to heart too. There are many in the world who suffer for the sake of Christ; and we are commanded to come to their aid.

Finally, we cannot help but notice the *obvious affection between Paul and the Ephesian believers*. They travelled out from their town to Miletus to meet him (verse 17). They knelt down together to pray, and freely wept. They fell upon him and kissed him; and the thing that saddened them most was that he said that "they would see his face no more" (verse 38). It was not only the difficulty of what lay ahead that cut them, or the memories of what they had been through in the past. It was that this Paul, who they had come to love so much, was now saying goodbye.

This is a picture of the affection which ought always to exist between a faithful minister and his people! Such a minister may often have hard things to say, things which his people do not want to hear. If they do hear, though, over time they will realise that it has all been done for their good. They will see what sacrifices their minister has been through for their sake, and he will become dear to them for Jesus' sake. Does every reader of these words truly value the gospel ministry? Well will it be for a church when all of its members can say that they do!

Expository thoughts on **The Acts Of The Apostles**

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 15 (Chapter 19:21-20:38)

Grace Church Belper

<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk>

(For previous weeks' notes, visit <http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/readingnotes.ph>)

Acts 19:21-28

21 When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." 22 So he sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus, but he himself stayed in Asia for a time. 23 And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way. 24 For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen. 25 He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said: "Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade. 26 Moreover, you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands. 27 So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship." 28 Now when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!"

Luke now tells us about the final significant event during Paul's longer stay in Ephesus. He will visit Ephesus again in chapter 20, but this is the end of his stay there. He purposed, guided by the Spirit of God, to go to Jerusalem, but to visit Macedonia and Achaia on the way. Paul's letters tell us that he wished to organise a collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem. The Gentile churches in the Gentile world would show their gratitude for the salvation that had come from the Jews. The churches of all nations would show their unity in Christ. The brothers who had more would have a chance to show their love and do good works towards those who had less. To see to all this, he sent Timothy and Erastus to prepare the way. His ultimate goal, though, was to go beyond Jerusalem too. Paul desired to preach Jesus Christ in the empire's capital: Rome.

A very important lesson in these verses is to see *the great foolishness of greed*. There was a riot at Ephesus, and Luke tells us how it began: with the love of money. The temple of Diana in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It brought in a great deal of money to the city. There was an annual festival which brought worshippers from all over the empire. Demetrius and his fellow workers made silver souvenirs which would be bought and taken home for use in worship there. The temple itself had huge amounts of money, and its landlord owned a great deal of property. And it was because of the love of this money that Demetrius opposed the gospel of Christ. He did not care about the message itself. He was not humbled by any knowledge of his own sin. He had no interest in whether Jesus of Nazareth really was alive again from the dead. All he knew was that Paul's preaching was causing people to turn away from idols, and that was costing him money.

What a great fool Demetrius now appears to us! What kind of gods are they who are made by human hands? What kind of a goddess was Diana, that she could not defend herself against Paul's preaching without the help of a mob? Which is more important:

spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the s

These verses bring Paul's speech to the Ephesians elders to an end. This is the long speech that is not a sermon, in the book of Acts. What did the apostle have to say and brought it to a close? Let us read, seeking to know what the Holy Spirit has to say to us today.

First of all, we see that Paul pointed the Ephesians to *the sufficiency of God*. If they really understood what he had been saying, they might be overwhelmed. He reminded them of the painful and continual labours he had endured. He had already told them of his daily tears, and the sufferings which he had faced in every city. Paul had faced the plotting of envious Jews (verse 19), and had had to resolve to not even hold his own life dear (verse 24). He had established the church under God's hand, only through unceasing carefulness, watching and warning in public and from house to house. Now he was handing that work on to them. Who could be sufficient for such things? How could they possibly cope with such a heavy burden? The answer is before us, on the face of the text. Paul said, "brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of his grace". There was something and someone who would be sufficient for them. God and the gospel teaching would be able to build them up and bring them into the inheritance which is kept for the saints. There was hope for the church in Ephesus - because there was a God who was able to provide for their every need.

Many people have no idea what "the sufficiency of God" could mean, because they have never been made aware of their need. Those who have never entered into the struggles of the Christian life and faithfulness to Christ, cannot imagine what hardships then come your way. Those who have not come to an end of themselves, cannot know what it means to discover the ability of God to undertake for their every need. But when we have been made aware of our weakness, our foolishness and the strength of the difficulties on every side, then here is a glorious comfort to us. We cannot be enough for the challenge; but God can. "God is able" - what glorious words those are! Paul wrote to the church at Philippi and said, "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). The great need of every Christian is to every day realise more of this truth. What we really want is more faith, to lean more heavily upon God. We must rely less upon the flesh, and our own imagined capabilities. We must trust more fully in a sovereign and all-powerful God. We should leave aside our own wisdom, plans and schemes. These are earthly, and the battle is a spiritual one in which they are no use. We must trust his word, which was a perfect revelation of his mind for the church. He knows exactly how the kingdom is to advance, and has revealed it to us there. Let us then glory in these things.

Secondly, Paul draws our attention to the importance of *caring for the weak and the poor*. For this purpose, Paul gave himself to a great deal of hard work and labour. As an apostle, he had the right to be supported by the churches (1 Corinthians 9:1-14). He could call upon them to supply for all of his earthly needs whilst he was labouring for their spiritual good. He did not do so, though; he worked with his own hands, not only for himself but for his fellow missionaries too (verse 34). Nobody could even pretend to accuse him of being a greedy man; he had desired neither silver nor gold nor even

are not "leaders" who can do as they please. They are servants, who must one day give an account.

Paul warned the elders to be very careful. He himself had fulfilled his great responsibility, making known the fullness of the will of God (verse 28). Now, that work would pass on to them. The work of an elder is a very serious and responsible one. It should not be entered lightly, or out of unworthy motives. It is a work only for those willing to shed tears (verse 19) - tears of love and concern.

The third thing to learn is to note the great danger which Paul saw for the Ephesian church, and hence for every true church. *It was the danger of false teaching.* Paul did not mince his words in describing false teachers; he called them "savage wolves". This does not mean that they were unpleasant as people. The fact that false teachers are normally kind, gentle and winsome is what makes them so dangerous. That is the reason why Paul had to say "watch". The wolves come in sheep's clothing. They use words and ideas that sound like the real thing, but are subtly and fatally different. Their teaching will destroy the flock, by replacing the glory and perfection of Christ with something else. They will turn men to themselves and to their own works, and cause them to forget the sufficiency of the death of the Son of God and faith in him. Paul warned too that false teachers, "speaking perverse things", would arise from amongst the disciples themselves, "to draw away disciples after themselves". There was only one way to be safe against such dangers: to constantly "watch". Paul had warned them continually, day and night during three years - because the danger was real and great. Well would it have been for the churches of our day if they had been similarly careful! What man can deny that false teachers have got in almost everywhere, and ruined countless churches that used to be faithful and strong? How many believers are there who used to be steadfast for the old ways and truths, but now allow almost any kind of heresy? All this happens when believers do not watch, and carefully guard their souls and their churches. We must be content to accept that many will say that we are too "rigid" and too "dogmatic" because we insist on these things. The outcome will prove that the apostle was right. The church in Ephesus obviously took careful heed to these words. Some years later, the Lord Jesus himself wrote to them. Whilst he had hard words to say about their loss of love, nevertheless, he strongly commended them for their carefulness in watching and guarding against the teachers of error (Revelation 2:1-7).

Acts 20:32-38

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. 33 I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. 34 Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. 35 I have shown you in every way, by labouring 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." 36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, 38 sorrowing most of all for the words which he

making some money, or offending God by idolatry? How low and mean his motives were - he loved money more than truth. He wanted to get on in this life above all other things. Covetousness brought him into this state, and from it he could not escape. Wretched men his fellow craft-workers were. But the sad truth is, there are countless people like them up and down our land today. They are "lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God". Matters of religion and truth do not concern them too much at all. Great controversies about faith and the way to eternal life are all things they have no time or interest to look into. But if someone should cross them in business - that is a serious thing! If their finances should be threatened, or they should lose their status in this present life, then drastic measures will be taken.

The Bible gives us very solemn warnings against greed. "Take heed, and beware of covetousness", the Saviour said; "for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things which he possesses" (Luke 12:15). We may not have too many shrines and statues in our homes; but how many yet love money more than God? How many are sitting in church on the Lord's Day thinking of how to get on in business, and get a bigger house or better car? "The love of money", said Paul, "is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). Let us remember Job's words: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return" (Job 1:21). "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out." (1 Timothy 6:7). Let us therefore seek first the things of the kingdom of God - and if we have food and clothing, with that, to be content (1 Timothy 6:8).

Luke is again showing us that the Christians were not the cause of all the trouble that followed the gospel. It was not believers who were disturbing the peace around the Roman world. The gospel's enemies were doing it. Again, Luke shows us that Christians ought to be a peace-loving people. We must seek to "lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (1 Timothy 2:2). Again though, Luke tells us that this will often not be possible. Those who do not love the Lord will be stirred up to cause trouble for us. What happened in Ephesus was not a one-off; it had happened already before, and many times since.

One final thought for us as we look at this passage is to see *the great progress which the gospel has made.* To us, the idea of shrines and idols seems very silly. We find it difficult to imagine bowing down to a local goddess. Either a god must reign over the whole world, or he is not a god at all. We should not, though, think that it is because we are very clever that we can see through these things! There were men of tremendous intelligence in the ancient world too. The reason why so many local gods, temples and idols have passed out of existence, is because Jesus Christ defeated them. Man cannot stop being religious; it is his very nature to worship. In the darkness of our fallen state, though, he worships idols instead of the true God. Idolatry prevailed throughout the known world; not until the times of modern science, but until the time when the gospel of Christ began to spread. Paul preached that items made with hands could not be gods; and the Spirit confirmed such preaching with power. In some parts of the world, statues and idols still prevail. Many parts of the east still have their shrines and their temples. The people there are not any less intelligent than we are; the gospel has not yet overcome in their lands. We must then be very grateful to God

that he has taken away such darkness from us. We must also pray for the countries where Christ is as yet little preached. We must struggle and desire the expansion of his kingdom, to the ends of the earth.

Acts 19:29-41

29 So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theatre with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul's travel companions. 30 And when Paul wanted to go in to the people, the disciples would not allow him. 31 Then some of the officials of Asia, who were his friends, sent to him pleading that he would not venture into the theatre. 32 Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the assembly was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together. 33 And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander motioned with his hand, and wanted to make his defence to the people. 34 But when they found out that he was a Jew, all with one voice cried out for about two hours, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" 35 And when the city clerk had quieted the crowd, he said: "Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple guardian of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Zeus? 36 Therefore, since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rashly. 37 For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess. 38 Therefore, if Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a case against anyone, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. 39 But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly. 40 For we are in danger of being called in question for today's uproar, there being no reason which we may give to account for this disorderly gathering. 41 And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

Now Luke tells us that the "whole city" became involved in the riot at Ephesus. Demetrius and his friends succeeded in drawing the town into the chaos. All the people gathered together into the town's theatre, which still exists today and held over twenty thousand people. In all the excitement, though, very few of those there knew what it was all about. The silversmiths had not found Paul, who their anger was really against. There were some people shouting one thing, and others something else.

Luke's record teaches us for one thing that *those who allow their opinions to be decided by others are foolish*. The wisdom of the crowds is often no wisdom at all. The pressure put upon us by others can be very great - but often without a shred of truth or goodness in it. At Ephesus, the silversmiths managed quite easily to bring the whole city into an uproar. They all rushed into the public meeting place, to sort out an apparently urgent matter. They all seemed to know at least that it was something to do with their goddess, and that her honour had been questioned. But as to who was doing the questioning, and how they were doing it, they had very little idea. When they did manage to draw someone out of the crowd to make a defence, it was Alexander, a Jew, not one of the Christian church. Even he, though, did not get to say anything, because the mad chanting of the crowd drowned him out before he could speak. Whether he

the emotion was very real. The sufferings he endured were real, the Lord who he served was real, and his compassion for the believers left behind was the same.

Paul's speech for one thing reminds us of *the infinite value of the gospel*. As the apostle preached and travelled around the ancient world, it was no holiday. As he faced the prospect of returning to Jerusalem, it was with the expectation of hardship and suffering. Wherever he had been, the Holy Spirit had testified, "that chains and tribulations" awaited him. Nonetheless, Paul did not turn back because of all of this. He was doing something which he knew was of far too much importance to let such things hold him back. He was running a race, and whatever the pain must finish to receive the prize. If he counted his own life as of more value than the gospel's progress, it would stop him from finishing "with joy". He had received a command from the Lord of glory himself, to serve his kingdom. He had a wonderful message, good news about the forgiveness of sins, the grace of God. These things, he counted as having more value than the whole world.

If we are thinking rightly, we must ask - "how could he do anything else?" The Son of God came from heaven, and visited this sin-cursed earth. He took human form, and lived a real human life, as a real man. For thirty years he lived and worked in an ordinary Jewish town. For three years he taught and performed miracles, healings and wonders like had never been seen before. Then he was crucified on the cross to atone for the sins of a great multitude of people who he had come to save. He rose from the dead, and was appointed by his heavenly Father to rule over all things until the end of the world. He now summons the nations to repentance and faith, and is subduing them all to himself. To everyone who believes, he gives a free pardon, sends his Holy Spirit, and brings them into fellowship with God. He is appointed to be the judge of the living and the dead; but before that great day, he welcomes each one who yields to him as Saviour and Lord. All these things being true, how could any right thinking person count anything as worthy of more of their hearts or minds? What could deserve the giving of ourselves to, even to the laying down of our lives? Men have fought wars to gain power and lands, and have crossed oceans to become rich and famous - things which they could not keep for more than a few years. How then, can we give anything less than our all for the Lord of glory? How can we value the gospel of Christ any less?

If we ask ourselves these questions, there is only one sensible answer. We ought to be ashamed of our sin, and our spiritual sloth. We ought to repent of everything which dulls our spiritual life, and turn afresh to our Lord. We ought to value the gospel like Paul did, and count nothing as worth what it is worth.

A second lesson from this speech is that *elders of churches are shepherds of God's flock*. This is a very instructive picture. It teaches us a great deal about what an elder is and what he is not. They are the shepherds, but not the owners of the flock. The rightful Lord is Jesus Christ, the God who took on flesh and shed his own blood to purchase them. He appoints shepherds, to care for the flock under him, the great master-shepherd. Elders are "overseers", who have the responsibility to care and to protect on behalf of another, but not the authority to lord it as they please (1 Peter 5:1-3). They must protect the flock from savage wolves, whose true desire is to damage and destroy. They must watch constantly and carefully, for dangers from inside and outside. The

and not do what I say?" are not in the Bible in vain. It is those who professed to be Christians who shall hear them.

Finally, let us notice the key themes at the heart of Paul's gospel preaching. *He insisted on two great things: repentance towards God, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.* When the Lord began his ministry, he also called for repentance and faith (Mark 1:15), and gave the same message to his apostles. As such, any gospel minister must repeatedly dwell on these subjects. Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). He who does not believe, shall be damned (Mark 16:16). All who do not repent, shall perish (Luke 13:3). God has commanded it of all men everywhere (Acts 17:30). These things being true, how can any faithful servant of Christ not speak often about these things? The good news itself is that those who turn to God through trust in Christ receive eternal life. To those who will not turn, and will not trust, there is no good news at all. Without real repentance and faith, there is no gospel, no church, and no everlasting life.

Reader; have you repented? Have you turned from your own way, and bowed to the Lord, Jesus Christ? Have you believed on him for the forgiveness of your sins? Are you still trying to prove yourself good enough for God, on your own terms; or have you rested on him as your only hope for the judgment that is to come? These are not small questions; on them the difference between heaven and hell hangs. Have you really leant upon Christ for salvation? Is your faith more than just a general belief, or is it a personal trust? Have you really rejected sin? Does it grieve you and produce godly sorrow, or is it just a sadness at sin's horrible results? Are you really born again and enjoying fellowship with God in Christ?

Acts 20:22-31

"22 And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. 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. 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. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. 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. 29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears."

This farewell speech is without doubt one of the greatest ever given. Is there anything like it in the history books of the world? For Paul, though, they were not words alone;

would have blamed the Christians and distanced himself, or whether he would have defended the teaching against idolatry, we do not know. In short, there was a great deal of heat and noise - but very little light or truth.

The power of the crowds can be very great. Once a large number of people seem to be behind a thing, others easily fall into line too. This, though, does not prove that the things being taught or believed have any truth in them at all. Truth is not settled by majority; and when that majority itself seems confused we should be very wary. Our world is full of people who are just going along with the way those around them live. This is a very godless age, so great numbers merely assume that religion cannot be important after all. They see very few others who take much care over it - so do likewise themselves. The newspapers and television scoff at the idea of a holy God and his anger against sin. They think it ridiculous that anyone should believe that we are under his wrath, and find the idea of an eternal hell so ridiculous they hardly know how to express it. They are sure that religion is just a matter of private opinions, and that it ought to be kept out of any public life. They are sure that we can all be good without God, and that if there is a God he will be pleased enough with us in the end. And because of all of this, many people readily go along with it, and leave religion to the "fanatics". This is the wisdom of the crowds today; but it is no less stupid than that of the mob at Ephesus two thousand years ago. God is still God, and we still owe our lives to him. God still has a law, and our consciences cannot get away from the idea of right and wrong. What we do is still done in his sight, and he is right to hold us to account for it. We must be convinced that however godless those who live around us are, yet we must fear and serve our Maker. They may tell themselves that they can do as they please; we must behave as those who expect a day of judgment.

Luke is once more showing us that the trouble that followed the gospel was caused by its enemies. Here in these verses we can see in particular *the value of an honest Christian life.* When the commotion arose, nobody really knew what all the anger was about. Fury against Paul had to be whipped up - it did not arise naturally. There was no reason known to all the mob why they had come together. Verse 31 tells us that Paul had friends amongst the important officials, who took steps to protect him. They knew well enough that Paul was no friend of their religion; yet they also knew that his conduct was blameless, and desired to protect him. When the town clerk spoke, he held it as an indisputable fact that the accused men had not done anything worthy of public rebuke (verse 37). The accuracy of the clerk's words might be doubted; Paul's teaching was certainly a "blasphemy" against the town's goddess. But in any case, the clerk knew that Paul was not exciting anyone to violence or revolt. Though a foreigner, though a Jew, though spreading a message which he did not believe, the clerk yet could see the honesty and integrity of the apostle Paul.

We also must seek to live a blameless life for the glory of Christ. We should not underestimate the value of it. It will be noticed by many who we thought never took any interest in the gospel or the way of salvation. It may have an influence on some who we never realise felt it. It may be blessed by the Lord in surprising ways. It was not for nothing that the Saviour called his people "salt" and "light" (Matthew 5:13-16). When the last day comes, the effect their lives have had will be seen to have been far

more than we ever imagined. Let us make sure that the salt does not lose its saltiness, and that our light is not hidden.

Acts 20:1-7

1 After the uproar had ceased, Paul called the disciples to himself, embraced them, and departed to go to Macedonia. 2 Now when he had gone over that region and encouraged them with many words, he came to Greece 3 and stayed three months. And when the Jews plotted against him as he was about to sail to Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. 4 And Sopater of Berea accompanied him to Asia - also Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. 5 These men, going ahead, waited for us at Troas. 6 But we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and in five days joined them at Troas, where we stayed seven days. 7 Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.

Paul had already decided to go back through Macedonia (19:21) - which included Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea and maybe now other churches too. After this riot at Ephesus, he decided that it was a suitable time to go, and after bringing the disciples together and embracing them, he did so. From Macedonia, he went into Greece, probably spending most of that three months with the church in Corinth. It was from Corinth that he wrote his magnificent letter to the church at Rome; a letter which more than any other letter ever written changed the history of the world. The various letters of Paul give us more detail than Luke does here. They tell us about Paul's deep concern for the state of the church at Corinth, and their attitude towards him. They give us details about Paul's plans for the collection for the poor believers at Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8-9, Romans 15:25-29). Luke, though, skips over this, to emphasise something else.

One thing underlined for us here is *the importance of encouragement*. When Luke came to summarise the point of Paul's whole trip, this word was the one he chose. He travelled throughout the region, making sure that he visited every church. This task was so important, that he must see each gathering of disciples. He had a purpose to visit Jerusalem, and he was deeply concerned about the situation in Corinth; but this task could not be cut short or left out. Christians need to be encouraged, because the way is long and hard. We are weak, and often tempted to lose heart and to give up. There are many enemies, and Christ's disciples are often just a little band. They often need to hear the words, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). They regularly need to be reminded that "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

We must be careful we do not get the wrong picture from Acts. In it, we see a most impressive advance of the gospel - across the known world. The word was preached with power; and great numbers were converted. However, the dangers to the believers were equally great. In these Gentile cities, the greater part had not become disciples.

desire was to work for and to please the Lord. He did not come to boost his own reputation, or to make himself rich. It was "with all humility", accompanied "with many tears and trials" that he had laboured from day to day amongst them. This was a public fact, which he expected them to be aware of. It was something which all of them would very well know. He had faced great opposition, and many temptations to hold back helpful things; but as a servant, he did not do so. If he was following his own interests and desires, he might well have done - but he was following his master, and he did not.

If we have not learnt to serve, then we have not learnt anything about Christianity at all. The Lord Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God, took on the form of a servant, becoming obedient even to the death of the cross (Philippians 2:7-8). He who was equal with God himself became lower than all - serving us in love. In doing so, he set the pattern which every disciple must follow. There is no other way to glory than the way he opened - and that way is that those who have repented and believed must serve. A Christian "minister" who is served by others whilst serving no-one is a contradiction in terms. Christ did not intend his followers to build up their own "ministries" to establish themselves a name; he intended them to give up their own selves for others. The one who does not do this, is no minister at all.

A second thing to see is that *a Christian minister must teach every part of the will of God, to everyone that he can*. If he is a servant, then this must be true. If we are running our own business, we can do as we like; but if we are taking orders from a Lord who we must always obey, then we have no such freedom. We must pass on all the truth that has been given to us, otherwise we have been unfaithful. Paul was able to look back on his time with Ephesus with a good conscience. He had carried out all his duties which the Lord had given to him. He could say and know that nobody could contradict him, that he had "kept back nothing that was helpful". He had declared to them "the whole counsel of God" (verse 27). Those things which were needed, he had "proclaimed", toning down nothing that his hearers would benefit from, whether it was easy or painful to accept. This was Paul's way of dealing with all peoples, and he had done it with "Jews and also to the Greeks", both "publicly and from house to house". Whether speaking to crowds, or in a private meeting, he had passed on the instructions which Christ had given to him.

There are plenty of supposed "ministers" today who are nothing of the kind, because their practice is nothing like the apostle Paul's. They tone down and completely leave out the things which an ungodly generation does not want to hear. Their aim is to please men which they do very well, but are utterly offensive in the eyes of God. They say little to nothing about God's holiness, judgment, or anger against sin. The chance of hearing any warning from them about hell or damnation are non-existent; they have all but convinced themselves that there shall be no such thing. Such ministers, though, are not the only kind who are unfaithful. Many teach only their favourite subjects, instead of the whole of God's word. Many Christians study only those parts of the Bible which comfort and console them. Whenever they read something which challenges their way of life, they move quickly on. Is this you? Let us be assured that one day, we will stand before the Lord Jesus. The words "Why did you call me Lord

God's kindness is all around us every day; we can become so used to it that we do not notice. We forget the depths of our sin and wickedness, against the one who lends us every breath. We imagine that the world exists all on its own, and that the sun and rain, springtime and harvest happen by themselves. We suppose that we are still alive because of happy chance, rather than the mercies of our Maker. One of the Christian virtues is to become thankful and grateful. It is part of the rebellion of our age that they are not thankful to their Creator (Romans 1:18-21); it is part of growth in grace to become so (Colossians 3:15).

Finally, Luke's words remind us that much of our service will be routine and mundane. Paul, like any other man, had to go on long journeys to get from one place to another. There are more details about these things here, because now Luke was with him in person again. In general, Luke has only recorded the highlights of the church's early years. In between the lines, though, there must have been a great deal of routine labour and toil. There would have been troubles as journeys had to be changed, or cancelled, or re-arranged. Some things would not work out. They would have faced all the frustrations and difficulties that we do. Some of us find these things hard to deal with; we wonder why there are not fireworks each day. We need to learn patience; it is a fallen world, and we must prove ourselves faithful over a long period of time. The kingdom of Christ will be very vast, and the time in which it is being built is already extremely great. When finished, though, its glory will be in keeping with all the sweat and tears that went into building it. Let us bow before God - and press on.

Acts 20:17-21

17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. 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, 19 serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; 20 how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, 21 testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."

It was only a few years since Paul had preached the gospel in Ephesus for the first time. Now the church had its own leaders who must take responsibility for the years to come. Here, the apostle called them for one last word of instruction and encouragement. These are his closing words to them, and hence full of teaching for every Christian church; let us learn from them.

Firstly, we should understand that *the Christian minister must above all be a servant*. Indeed, this is what the word "minister" means; this is where the word comes from. So deeply did those who went before us in the faith understand this, that it was the very word they chose to describe the gospel labourer - he must serve. In doing so, they were following the Lord Jesus Christ, who "came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many", and told his followers to do likewise (Mark 10:42-45). From the very beginning when Paul came to Asia, he had lived consistently. His one

There were many groups prepared to use violence against them. The faith was new and there were many false teachers who offered easy ways out. It could not have been easy to be opposed to the pagan gods of the Gentiles, and hated by the Jews as well. Idolatry was a continual way of life in many of these cities, and hard to avoid without leaving public life altogether. It was easy to lose one's living and position by staying faithful to Christ. In short, there were very many temptations to stop following Christ. The solution to this was encouragement.

Reader, have you begun to lose heart? Do Christ's promises seem far off, and to have lost their sweet flavour? Does trouble, doom and difficulty seem to be all around? Do there seem to be no reward in following the Lord, or being faithful to his name? Do many on all sides seem to do well enough, though they have departed from God's word? You must throw away all these gloomy thoughts! The Son of God is still at the Father's right hand. He is returning in glory to bless those who have been faithful to him. In his presence shall be pleasures forevermore. The end of the wicked shall be very dreadful, and if we live like them without Christ we shall share in it. But when the day of judgment comes, those who have persevered with Jesus shall never be ashamed. Let us remember all his promises to us; he will not allow us to be tested beyond what we can bear. He is faithful, and will be with us through every trial (1 Corinthians 10:13).

For a second thing, these verses shows us that *there are many faithful servants of Christ that we know almost nothing about*. There are names mentioned here that are not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture. Others have only the tiniest mentions, which confirm that these men were fellow-workers and fellow-sufferers in the gospel of Christ (Philemon 24, Colossians 4:10). Indeed, how little we know about Luke himself! In verses 5 and 6, he begins to say "we" and "us" again - when Paul returned to Philippi. What had Luke done all that time in Philippi? What sufferings had he endured for Christ's sake? We do not know - but Jesus does.

Most servants of Christ are completely unknown to the world - and to most of their fellow believers too. In the last decades, tens of millions have come to the Saviour in China; but who are the evangelists, the pastors and the missionaries who have been at the front of this? There have been tremendous advances in Africa and in South America in the last fifty years - but who are the instruments which God has used? For the most part, we have to say "we do not know". It is God's will that many of his most valuable servants should do their work in obscurity. It is the Father's purpose that the name of his Son should be advanced - and those of the workmen should remain hidden. Let us just be certain that our fame in this world is not a measure of how much we are loved by God. Our rejoicing should not be in being well known or widely loved. Our rejoicing should be in the fact that the Father himself knows us and our names are written in heaven. We should strive to copy the spirit of John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Finally, let us notice Paul's *deep love for the gathering of the church*. When the travellers came to Troas, they "stayed seven days". Why? Because that meant that they would be able to meet with the church, on the first day of the week. It meant that the

would be there when the church came together to break bread, and they could share in its fellowship. To be sure, they would certainly have met with most of the church throughout the week. But on the Lord's day, they could remember the Lord's dying and rising in the gathering of the church.

The church is given the most wonderful names and titles in the Bible. It is the body of which Christ is the head. It is the gathering of God's holy saints. It is the flock for which the shepherd laid down his life. It is the bride of God's one and only Son. How few there are who rightly estimate the preciousness of the church in God's sight! How many scorn it, and fail to see its true value. They do not care for its gatherings, or if they do the worth they put upon it is little different to many other things. Even for many believers, is this not true? The slightest and smallest reasons will persuade them to stay away, or to take offence and move on to somewhere else. But this was not the way of the first Christians, and is not pleasing to our Lord. For the church, he delivered up his own Son to the damnation of the cross; for the church, we ought to give our all too.

Acts 20:7-16

7 Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. 8 There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together. 9 And in a window sat a certain young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep. He was overcome by sleep; and as Paul continued speaking, he fell down from the third storey and was taken up dead. 10 But Paul went down, fell on him, and embracing him said, "Do not trouble yourselves, for his life is in him." 11 Now when he had come up, had broken bread and eaten, and talked a long while, even till daybreak, he departed. 12 And they brought the young man in alive, and they were not a little comforted. 13 Then we went ahead to the ship and sailed to Assos, there intending to take Paul on board; for so he had given orders, intending himself to go on foot. 14 And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene. 15 We sailed from there, and the next day came opposite Chios. The following day we arrived at Samos and stayed at Trogyllium. The next day we came to Miletus. 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.

We are now reading about Paul's last actions in Asia. After this, and his speech to the elders at Ephesus, he returned to Jerusalem. The third missionary journey is now coming to an end. Soon, Paul will be a prisoner heading towards Rome. In the first verses here, we are in Troas, the north-west tip of Asia.

In this section, we have the first instance in church history of a man falling asleep whilst listening to preaching! Luke emphasises that Paul's message was prolonged. The "many lamps" (verse 8) in the upper room would have reduced the oxygen, and increased the heat. The vapours would have made it particularly easy to doze off. Once we know that there was a happy outcome, there is something faintly amusing about this

incident. But let us learn something from it that we cannot deny. *In the mind of the apostle Paul, Christians are built up through the preaching of God's word.* Maybe this occasion he went on too long; but maybe not, because once the young man was brought back, he carried on until dawn. It is clear that Paul believed that there was one real way to establish these believers. He would soon be gone from them, and he had only a few hours left together. The best thing to do with all those hours, within the worship of God, was to teach and instruct them. They would be established by hearing and understanding God's word. That was the food which they needed for their souls, which would equip them for the times to come.

Thousands of years ago, Moses said "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Deuteronomy 8:3); and those words were quoted by the Son of God himself (Matthew 4:4). Man is more than a body; he also has a soul. The body will decay and die unless it is fed; and this truth is no less true for the soul. Without spiritual food, spiritual life cannot advance. And that is surely the root cause of the spiritual poverty throughout our land today. The word of God is little preached, little studied, little read, little understood, and little believed. Great amounts of time and effort can be found for entertainment, for money-making and the like - but almost none for the deep needs of our souls. Even in churches which call themselves evangelicals, there is more and more music - but less and less of the word of God. The very idea of a man preaching to midnight and then until dawn sounds like madness. Were the apostle to return from the grave and try to do such a thing, he would be chased away as a fanatic. Yet, we ought to take it as a fixed rule that our appetite for God's word is an infallible measure of our spiritual life. Where we have little desire for it, we will find little blessing and little growth. When the Bible is read, appreciated, preached, loved, honoured and obeyed - great things will result. Let us ask ourselves if we find ourselves growing in desire for the word of God or not. Do we appreciate it more than we did a year ago? We may not be able to tell the difference from one day to the next; but let us be convinced that if we study with God's help, we shall certainly grow.

A second thing to see in these verses is *the great kindness of God.* It was in many ways a very solemn occasion. The great apostle had spent and been spent in the service of these believers. He had faced mobs, violence, prison and hardships of every kind for their sake. Now he was departing from them, and giving them his final words. They would face many dangers and trials of their faith, and he was instructing them that they might persevere through them all. On this occasion, young Eutychus, sinking into sleep, fell out of the window in which he sat, from the third storey down to the ground (verse 9). From there, he was "taken up dead". But in God's great mercy, he was not really dead. When Paul went down and breathed up him, he announced that his life was still in him, and he was brought in alive. There are not a huge number of miracles in the book of Acts, when we understand that it covers over two decades. God, though, granted one at this time, so that the believers should not be overcome with sorrow. There was surely much hardship to come - but God brought them joy now in granting Eutychus his life again. They had a powerful reminder that though the Christian faith is a call to take up one's cross and die to oneself, and though they must be ready to lay all for Christ's sake, yet God would bring them life at last.