

# THE LAST WORDS TO CHURCH LEADERS

## ACTS 20:28–38

### ***Introduction***

These words are the last words of Paul to church leaders that are recorded. It is a critical message, a message that needs to be studied time and again by every church leader.

- I. Guard yourselves and the church (v. 28).
- II. Feed the church of God (vv. 28-31).
- III. Live for God and for God's Word (v. 32).
- IV. Labour and give, not coveting worldly wealth (vv. 33-35).
- V. Conclusion: pastor and people departed (vv. 36-38).

### ***I. Acts 20:28 Guard Yourself and the Church***

The first duty is to guard yourselves and the church. This is a strong charge.

1. The minister must look after his own life, his character and conduct, before he can look after the flock of God. He must keep watch (prosechete), that is, give attention to, concentrate upon, focus upon, attend to, watch after and guard his life. There are specific areas he must guard.

- a. He must guard against false teaching.

*Luke 12:1* Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."

- b. He must guard against an unforgiving spirit.

*Luke 17:3-4* So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

- c. He must guard against self-indulgence, drunkenness and the possessions of this life.

*Luke 21:34* "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap."

- d. He must guard against the fables, myths, speculations, ideas and false doctrines of men as well as the genealogies (roots, heritage, ancestry — useless knowledge) of men.

*1 Tim 1:4* Nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work — which is by faith.

- e. He must watch and give himself to reading, preaching and teaching.

*1 Tim 4:13* Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

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- f. He must especially give himself to doctrine (te didaskalia), the teaching of Scripture.

*1 Tim 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

2. The minister must look after “all the flock.” There are three reasons stressed in Scripture.

- a. Sheep can wander about and get lost (see note, Lk. 15:4 for five ways that a sheep loses its way).

*Isa 53:6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

*Prov 21:6 A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapour and a deadly snare.*

*Prov 27:8 Like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home.*

*Jer 15:6 “You have rejected me,” declares the Lord. “You keep on backsliding. So I will lay hands on you and destroy you; I can no longer show compassion.”*

*Mat 24:12 “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold.”*

*Heb 10:38 “But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.”*

*2 Pet 2:15 They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness.*

- b. Sheep can be seized by the beasts (false teachers) of the world and within the church (see *False Teachers*, Acts 20:29-30; Jn. 10:1; 10:7-8).

*Isa 56:9-11 Come, all you beasts of the field, come and devour; all you beasts of the forest! Israel’s watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark; they lie around and dream, they love to sleep. (They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain.)*

*Jer 23:1-2 “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord. Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the Lord. (see Jer. 25:34-38)*

*Jer 50:6 “My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains. They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place.”*

*Ezek 34:2-6 “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but*

*you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.”* (see Eze. 34:7-31)

- c. Sheep without a shepherd are in a pathetic condition (see Mk. 6:34).

**Mat 9:36** *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

**1 Pet 2:25** *For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

## II. Acts 20:28–31 Shepherd the Church

The second duty is to shepherd the church of God. The word *shepherd* (poimainein) has the act of overseeing, leading and feeding the Church of God. Church leaders are to shepherd the church of God (see note, pt. 4, *Shepherd*, Jn. 10:2-3 for discussion on the seven functions of *feeding* or *shepherding*). There are four reasons why the church leader is to shepherd the church of God.

1. The church must be shepherded because *God* has purchased the church and paid the supreme price for it with His own blood. Note three all-important points.
  - a. Jesus is unequivocally said to be God. He is the One who poured out His blood to purchase the church. He is very God, very Man. (See *The Word*, Jn. 1:1-5. See Rom. 9:5; Col. 2:9; Tit. 2:13. See notes, Ph. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15; 1:16-17; 1:18-19.)
  - b. Jesus *bought* (periepoiesato) the church. Therefore, it is His; He owns it and He has all say-so concerning everything about the church. As Purchaser, His Word about the care of His church is to be carried out explicitly, just as He dictates. There is to be no deviation whatsoever. Leaders are but overseers appointed by Him to shepherd His church as He says.
  - c. Jesus paid the supreme price for the church — His own blood (see *Blood of Jesus Christ*, Acts 20:28).
2. The church must be shepherded because it is the duty of church leaders to shepherd it. Church leaders are called *overseers* (episkopous) or elders (Jewish name) or bishops (Greek) or presbyter or episkopate (overseer). Note the terms are used interchangeably: elder (v. 17), overseer, bishop (v. 28), or episkopate [v. 28], and shepherd (v. 28). (See *Elder*, Tit. 1:5-9.)

**1 Pet 5:1-4** *To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of*

*God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*

3. The church must be shepherd because false teachers will come in among believers and seduce them (see *False Teachers*, Acts 20:29-30).
4. The church must be shepherd because of Paul's supreme example of faithfulness. Paul sets a dynamic example for all leaders of the church. He was a mere man as every leader is, yet he was able to please God immensely, able to shepherd the church exactly as God wished. He demonstrated perfectly that the man chosen by God to be an overseer can shepherd the church as it should be done (see Acts 14:14-18).

- a. He *warned* (noutheton) (v. 31). The word means both to give advice and to warn.

*Col 1:27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

- b. He warned everyone, not neglecting any or favouring any. He gave attention to all, saw to it that they were fully fed and shepherded.
- c. He warned night and day: every night, every day, all the time, constantly and consistently, never missing an opportunity.
- d. He warned them "with tears," full of compassion and concern, being touched by the misery and fate of the lost, the needs of the saved and the glorious mercy of God.

*John 21:17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."*

*1 Pet 5:2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve.*

*Jer 3:15 Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding.*

*Jer 23:4 "I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the Lord.*

## ACTS 20:28 BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST

*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. Acts 20:28*

Jesus paid the supreme price for the church — His own blood. Note a most precious fact: Jesus' blood is said to be the blood of God. As Man, the blood that ran through His veins was the blood of God; therefore, it was precious, full of all dignity and value and worth. This is a critical fact for the ministry.

=> The blood of Jesus — being of God — is most precious, the supreme and ultimate in value and worth.

The point is this: Jesus gave the blood of God, the supreme price, to purchase the church. For this reason, church leaders are to give their blood — to sacrifice everything, all they are and have — to make the supreme dedication to shepherd the church. The church is the most valuable and precious asset on earth. □

## ACTS 20:29–30 FALSE TEACHERS

*I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. Acts 20:29–30*

Paul said, “I know that,” that is, he knew that false teachers would come in among believers. There is no question about the fact. The church must expect and be prepared for false teachers. (See Mt. 7:15-20.)

1. False teachers come from outside the church.

*Mat 7:15* “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”

*2 Cor 11:13-15* For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

*2 John 1:7* Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.

*Mark 13:22* “For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect — if that were possible.”

2. False teachers come from inside the church (see Eze. 34:1-10).

**Mat 15:8-9** “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”

**1 Tim 1:5-7** The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

**1 Tim 4:1-2** The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.

**1 Tim 6:3-5** If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.

**Titus 1:10-11** For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach — and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

**2 Pet 2:1** But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them — bringing swift destruction on themselves.

**1 John 2:18-19** Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

**1 John 4:1-3** Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

3. False teachers distort, pervert the truth. The word *distort* (diestrammena) means turned aside, twisted, perverted. What they teach has *some truth and some error*.

They take the truth and distort it, coming up with a twisted truth. They teach *distorted truths* that are not of God, not of His Word or will. (See notes, Mt. 7:17; 7:18.)

4. False teachers *draw away* (tou apospain) disciples. The phrase means to separate, to drag and tear away. False teachers draw people away from the truth in three different ways.
  - a. They attack the believers themselves: sowing discord and mischief among them.
  - b. They teach error, perverting and distorting the truth, either taking away or adding to the Word of God.
  - c. They attack the genuine leaders: blemishing and defaming their characters and ministries, stirring up believers against them.

Note, false teachers are called by two descriptive names in Scripture.

=> ferocious wolves (see note, Mt. 7:15).

=> dogs (Ph. 3:2. See *Dog*, Mk. 7:27.) □

### III. *Acts 20:32 Live for God and His Word*

The third duty is to live for God and for God's Word. The "Word of his grace" is the Word of God's favour, of His glorious salvation in its fullness, of His truth, of His will. Therefore, the "Word of his [God's] grace" is His revealed Word, both the Living Word (Christ Himself) and the written Word (the Holy Bible). Now note the point: the church leader is to be *committed* (paratithemai) to God's Word; that is, he is to place, commit, entrust, fix, lay and deposit his life with God and His Word. Very simply, the church leader is to totally entrust his life to God and His Word, laying himself completely upon both. There are two reasons for trusting God and His Word so completely.

1. God and His Word will build up and edify the believer.

*1 Cor. 3:10-14* "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward."

*2 Cor 5:1* Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

*Eph 2:20* Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

*Eph 4:12* To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

**2 Tim 3:15** *And how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

2. God and His Word will give an inheritance to believers. The *inheritance* (kleronomian) is both...

- present, in the here and now.

**Acts 26:18** *'To open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'*

**Col 1:12** *Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.*

- future, in the new heavens and earth.

**Rom 8:16-17** *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

**Heb 9:15** *For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance — now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.*

**1 Pet 1:3-4** *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you.*

(See notes, *Rewards*, Lk. 16:10-12; Jn. 4:36-38; Rev. 14:13; 21:24-27 for a list of the rewards of believers.)

#### **IV. Acts 20:33–35 *Labour and Financial Support***

The fourth duty is to labour and give, not coveting worldly wealth. Note two striking points.

1. Paul did not covet worldly wealth. He did not covet silver or gold or clothing. In the ancient world rich clothing was a sign of wealth. Many in the church had plenty and some were rich. They had...

- money
- property
- stylish clothes
- transportation

But Paul did not covet what they had. His mind and thoughts were not focused upon worldly things. Money, property, clothing and the latest in transportation held no appeal for him. He craved something far more important:

=> the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

=> meeting the desperate needs of the world.



=> delivering men out of the slavery of sin.

=> sharing the gospel of life everlasting.

**Thought 1.** The ministers and teachers of the gospel must be totally committed to sharing the gospel. And total commitment involves not only verbal preaching and teaching, but the spread of the gospel through the financial support of others. (See Mt. 19:16-22; 19:23-26. These two passages need to be studied and applied by every believer, but especially by ministers and teachers of the gospel. See 1 Sam. 12:3-5; 1 Th. 2:5-6; 1 Tim. 3:3, 8; 6:10.)

2. Paul laboured at secular work. He was a craftsman, a tent-maker (see Acts 18:3). There are at least five reasons why Paul laboured at secular work.

a. To meet his own necessities (v. 34).

b. To help fellow ministers serving with him (v. 34).

c. To help the weak (v. 35).

d. To be more like Jesus (v. 35). This is a saying of Jesus that is not recorded in the gospels, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Jesus of course gave to the ultimate...

- coveting nothing of this world
- giving all He had to others
- sacrificing His own life for others

Paul sought to be like His Lord, to be conformed to His image. For that reason. Paul laboured at secular work when needed.

e. Not to be a burden to the believers nor to the churches. This reason is not mentioned in this passage, but it is in several others (2 Cor. 11:9; 1 Th. 2:9; 2 Th. 3:8). Paul meant at least two things by not being a burden to any man, and these two things are powerful lessons for modern ministers of the gospel.

First, some unbelievers, and most unfortunately some carnal believers, were accusing Paul...

- of "coveting" a living from the churches.
- of seeking comfort and ease at the expense of believers and the churches.
- of receiving the offerings and stealing from them (2 Cor. 1:17-18; 8:20-22. See note, pt. 2, 2 Cor. 12:13-18.)

By working at secular work and not accepting money from the churches, Paul was able to combat these charges and prove they were lies. Note: he also had representatives appointed by the churches to carry the church offerings to Jerusalem (see Acts 20:4-6).

Second, Paul wanted to be free and independent of the churches and believers. He did not want the congregation to feel as though he was their man, that he had to do their

bidding. He wanted no restraint and no pressure put upon his right to move about and minister and preach the gospel as he sensed the need.

He did not want any temptation whatsoever, any sense that he must cater to the desires and whims and fancies of the congregation, not unless they were truly of God.

**Thought 1.** Note four very significant points.

- 1) Paul received financial support from some churches. He did not always labour at secular work, not in every situation. He saw the value in being completely free from the burden of financial worries so that he could devote full time to the ministry. (See Acts 18:3.)
- 2) The minister of the gospel has the right to receive his living from the churches. In fact, Christ taught that the minister was definitely to be supported by the church. (See Mt. 10:9-10. This is an important passage, a passage that every minister and church should study, for it is our Lord's teaching.)
- 3) There are great benefits in following Paul's example when practical. Being financially free to minister as God directs without the influence of carnal prejudices and fancies would provide some clear advantages as pointed out above. However, every minister must always remember: there are some in every true church who walk ever so closely with the Lord, and have been doing so for years. God has given His vision for their church and their community to them. They have lacked only one thing — a Spirit-filled minister to help them. The minister needs to listen to these dear believers, even if he is self-supporting.
- 4) Every minister should be labouring so he can help the weak (v. 35). No matter where his income is coming from, he is to set the example for all others in giving to meet the needs of the desperate.

*Acts 20:35* 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.'

*Rom 15:1* We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

*1 Th 5:14* And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

## V. Acts 20:36–38 Conclusion

The conclusion of Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian elders is a touching scene, the kind of affection being expressed that every minister and teacher of the gospel would covet. Note: Paul was so gripped with emotion he knelt right there on the dock with all the Ephesian elders: he knelt with them all and began to pray for these dear men of God.

(The scene was most unusual, for it was the custom of Jews to stand when praying in public.)

The elders...

- wept deeply
- fell on Paul's neck, embracing and kissing him repeatedly (Greek)
- were gripped with grief
- accompanied him to the ship ■