

Last Words

I stand before you today with new eyes. I can see so much more clearly than I could before. I don't mean spiritually. I'm talking about seeing here in the physical world. You see, I had my cataracts taken out. I can see much more clearly than I could before. The sawtooth ridgeline atop the wall of Pattee Canyon to the south of town. I not only see it, but I see the outline of the individual trees more distinctly than ever before. Each stands distinct. I can drive without glasses. This is great. As soon as I walked out of Rocky Mountain Eye I could see better without my glasses than I did with them. You know, I've worn glasses since third grade. I should've had the cataracts taken out back then.

But all humor aside, we followers of Jesus talk about light so much. And what is light for if not to enable us to see more and see more clearly the reality of the world around us and to help us discern the path we are told to follow. Jesus gives sight to those who have never seen. Look to John chapter 9 when Jesus heals a man blind since birth. Jesus says, "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world. After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. 7 "Go," he told him, "Wash in the Pool of Siloam". So, the man went and washed and came home seeing."

But it is in the story of Saul, the persecutor of the young Christian movement, that we see the story of light played out most dramatically. Saul is traveling on the road to Damascus when he is struck by a vision of Jesus. He is a new human being. Many of us have had the experience of a new understanding. We see with greater clarity, but few of us have such a dramatic experience.

And when any one suddenly sees more clearly, the question becomes, "What am I supposed to do now?" Do we conceal what we have seen, hiding our light under the proverbial bushel? NT Wright tells us what Paul saw with such clarity. He saw that the Kingdom of God had arrived with Jesus' birth, baptism, his ministry, death and resurrection. And he knew that God's Kingdom would continue to exist and to grow. So, he set out to spread word of the Kingdom and to help build it among the Gentiles. All of this is well documented not only in his letters but also in the book called the Acts of the Apostles. We have been working our way through this book during spring. Remember that over the past year working with the book *Following the Path* by John Mark Comer to learn how we can follow Jesus. Comer gives us three steps, spend time with Jesus, become like Him, and finally do what He does.

So how does Paul follow the path. The book of Acts tells us how. Paul spent the rest of his life making three great mission trips. I call them looping trips because when you follow them on the map you see how many miles Paul traveled around the Mediterranean. He made three great journeys from Jerusalem and Antioch, big looping journeys sailing through the Mediterranean, and walking through Turkey and Greece. And on these journeys, he announces the Kingdom of God to all who will hear.

First to the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, then north into the heart of what is now Turkey, a broad valley ringed by mountains, much like Missoula, but much larger. Here he visits the Galatians in the towns of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Then he circles back home to Antioch. Second, through Galatia, then across the water to Greece, where he visits Phillipi, Berea, and Thessalonica, then south to Athens, Corinth. Finally, back again to the western shore of Turkey to Ephesus, then home again to Antioch this time by sea. Then on his third and final journey he revisits many of the cities he had seen before, going all the way to Greece once again.

It was on this third trip that he addresses the elders of Ephesus in the words found in the Book of Acts, chapter 20 verses 17-38. This is our scripture passage for today - Paul's farewell address to the Ephesians. He speaks to them as he is about to set out, as it turns out, for his last journey back home to Jerusalem. This is a very long passage, and I'm not going to read it all at once but instead dip into it in sections.

Paul says, "From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church."

Whoa! What about all the people who aren't elders? Is this for them too? I mean we have these divisions in church – elders, deacons, lay people. Each group has different roles, different responsibilities. Someone might ask well I'm only a deacon or a lay member. Are these words for all of us? Paul's words are directed to leaders of the church. But don't all of us have some kind of leadership role. We are led by others, then we turn and guide or lead those around us – family, neighbors, friends, a co-worker who is struggling with a personal problem, or maybe a friend who sits next to us in the pew; maybe someone with whom we share small group membership. So, the words Paul has here are really for all of us in His church. Let's get back to his words.

Paul speaks, "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. 19 I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. 20 You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. 21 I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."

The Word of the Lord.

Paul is testifying here to what he has done, to how faithfully he has transmitted the message, in spite of what he calls "severe testing". We know how Paul has sacrificed and suffered from the earlier chapters in Acts when we have seen him punished and persecuted in many of the towns he has visited.

Paul continues his words to the Ephesians.

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God,[a] which he bought with his own blood.[b] 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock."

He is saying be a shepherd to the flock, watch over them, protect them from false prophets who will prey on them. Be a good shepherd. Remember Psalm 23 – The Lord is my shepherd. For many we will also think of Luke 15 where Jesus tells of the shepherd who searches the wild for the one sheep of 100 that has been lost. And in John 10, verse 9 Jesus says, "I am the gate." And of course, we mostly think of this as meaning Jesus is the gate through which we must pass to gain salvation and eternal life. But in digging around, I found another view of what these words mean. In biblical times the sheep were gathered at night and kept safely in a sheepfold made perhaps of stone. But there was an opening so the sheep could enter and leave. How do you keep predators from getting in among the sheep? The shepherd, every night, would lie across the opening to keep out danger, to prevent wolves from getting in among the sheep. Jesus is the gate that protects us from danger. So, Paul is telling us to protect one another.

Paul's words once again. "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. 34 You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. 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.' ”

Paul made his own living wherever he went as a tentmaker. Decades ago, it might have been in the eighties, there was a TV miniseries called Peter and Paul. It told the story of these two apostles in the years after the resurrection. And I still remember one scene where someone finds Paul in his shop, making a tent. Paul breaks off his work to talk and for some reason this has stuck in my mind as much as any scene from the movie.

Now our time is much different from Paul's. We have a large institutional church. And like any church, any institution, we have staff and buildings, and all this requires money. Today the church is often suspected of accumulating wealth for its own sake. We certainly see examples of TV evangelists who live lavish lives, who forget that serving God and amassing wealth and luxury are two separate things that should not be mixed together. But even in a small everyday church, we can be too attentive to the worldly needs and demands of the church and neglectful toward the central needs of our faith, of our people, and of those on the outside. How do we find the right path? Look to Paul for inspiration, for a model. Paul, who wherever he went made his living as a tentmaker. Here Paul shows us the ideal, to always try to be giving more than we get. In all this Paul has served the Lord, but also served us as a model, an exemplar of how to serve, how to disciple, how to follow the way.

Paul tells the Ephesians that they will not see him again. These are the last words of his that they will hear so what he is telling them is of great importance. When you are hearing from someone for the last time, you don't talk about the weather. Paul is now doing what Jesus did. He turns his steps, finally, to Jerusalem. Remember that in the gospel of Luke Jesus ministers to the people in the north, in Galilee But at a certain point, He begins to head south. He turns his steps to Jerusalem. Now, Paul does the same. And he knows the danger he will face there, just as Jesus knew the peril awaiting Him.

Once again, we turn to Paul's last words to the Ephesians.

“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. 23 I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. 24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.”

Think of the elders of this church, knowing that they will not see Paul again. No doubt there are tears and sadness, people searching for what they know are their final words to this man. Paul is like their parent, their great model of devotion and service and they are watching him leave.

Once again, Paul's parting words. “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.” What is the task the Lord Jesus has given us. Isn't it the same – to testify through our words and deeds to the good news of God's grace.

Amen