The Whole Counsel of God

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[0:00] My name's Tim. I'm part of the team here. We are continuing our preaching series in the book of Acts.! We've got to Acts chapter 20 this morning. So if you've got a Bible with you, if you want to turn there, if you don't, the words will be on the screen.

We are kind of jumping into what is in essence Paul's farewell tour. What we've heard the last couple of weeks would also be part of that, but he's...
He's on his last journey around several of the churches that he's helped to start. And what we're going to see in today's passage is the things that he is most concerned to share with them as he's thinking, I'm not going to talk to you again.
What is the core of his heart when he's thinking, I'm not going to talk to you again? Let's see. So, Acts chapter 20, I'm going to start in verse 1. After the uproar ceased, so this is, you might remember what happened in Ephesus last week as it were.
It's essentially a big riot. Like everywhere Paul goes, but a particularly big riot because he crashed the economy of the city by bringing too many people to faith in Christ and their previously very lucrative trading idols crashed through the bottom.
[1:26] So, it's a big riot. So, after the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples. And after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia.

So, it's lots of places he's been before. When he'd gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. There he spent three months, because it's winter. But he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews, as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia.
Cepater the Berean son of Phyrus accompanied him, and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Segundus, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus.
These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas, but we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days.
Pause there. As I say, this is his farewell tour, and it's not like many a band from a long time ago who launched their farewell tour, and they seem to launch a farewell tour every year until eventually they die.
[2:38] Paul knows he's not going to come back. In fact, towards the end of the passage it becomes very clear that he has a good sense of where he's going. He knows that after this story he's going to have to go to Jerusalem, and that that isn't going to go well for him.

And in essence, every step of this journey is like a step towards eventually reaching Rome, and the heart of an empire, an audience with an emperor, and a sword that will land on his neck.
But Paul is aware that the journey that he's being led on will lead to his death. And so as a result, he's like, I don't think I'm going to get back to these churches. And so I need to make sure that I encourage them with whatever it is that he particularly feels they need tonight.
And in fact, this journey that he's going on now is the journey where they make the collection that he talks about in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, where they collect money for the poor in Jerusalem from these churches.
I tell you that because we're going to preach through those chapters in January and February, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, thinking about being generous. But this is the story behind it. This is the context for it.
[3:46] This journey that he's going on now, collecting money from these churches, hoping to give it to the very poor in Jerusalem. Let me keep reading. This is verse 7.

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So he's in Troas. On the first day of the week, that's Sunday, when we were gathered together to break bread, so they mean Sunday worship, Paul talked with him, intending to depart on the next day.
And he prolonged his speech until midnight. Hmm. I mean, it is tempting. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered.
And a young man named Eutychus, sitting in the window, sank into a deep sleep, as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead.
But Paul went down and bent over him and, taking his arms, said, Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him. And when Paul had gone up and broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed.
[5:00] And they took the youth away alive and were not a little comforted. But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul abroad from there, so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land.

And when he met Assos, we took him on board and went to Mityli. And sailing from there, we came the following day opposite Chios, the next day we touched at Samos, and the day after that we went to Melitus, for Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.
I mean, you've already made my jokes for me, but yes, Paul preaches all night, in essence. He said he preaches on to midnight, so a young boy falls asleep, falls from the window, dies, the English there might be slightly unclear, but he dies, Paul goes down, prays for him, raises him to life, and then goes back upstairs, and keeps preaching until daybreak.
Interesting. Why? Well, the first thing we can read is, Paul is like, I'm not going to see these guys again. His top priority for them, is essentially that they are theologically equipped, to spiritually persevere.
He wants them to persevere in the faith, he wants them to keep going, despite all the potential opposition, that they might face, and he knows that one of the things that they need to do that well, is to be well equipped from the Bible.
[6:34] And so he teaches them the Bible. Of course, for him, this primarily meant the Old Testament, because much of the Bible he wrote, or indeed, Luke is writing, as we're reading about his journeys. He's opening the scriptures to them, because he's like, this is what they need, and they need it, to the extent that it is worth me actually talking until midnight, and a bull falls asleep and dies, and then we go and raise him up, and then we'll go back and have communion together, and then keep going until daybreak.

Now, the thing to remember, I think, is that no one had to be there. There's no weekend in the Roman Empire, this is a working day such as any other, and they've all got to get up and go to work the next day, in order to live and eat.
And yet they choose to be there, listening to people until midnight, and then actually on until daybreak. That's interesting. Would you?
Would I? Would we gather to hear preaching through the night? I actually suspect, some of us might be like, oh yes, yes, actually probably not. But we should, and this is a unique example, this is not what Paul did every way he went, this is a kind of, I've got a day, I'm going to try and give a deposit as much as I can, of everything I could say to you.
But still, the people, they're eager to be with him. They're eager to hear what the Bible has to say. Is that a high priority for us?
[8:11] Is it a high priority for us to be theologically equipped to spiritually persevere, as in to know the Bible so that we can continue with Jesus? Some of you will be like, yeah, actually it is.

But I just, I think we should challenge ourselves with that. Is that a high priority for us? The following Jesus, discipleship, is about our bodies, and it's about our hearts, but it's also about our minds.
So it's not just about knowing things, but that is part of the picture. It's an important part of the picture. What we do is very important, what we feel is very important, what we think is also important.
And our minds should be being formed by the Bible. I think we should challenge ourselves with that. Paul's desire, when he's like, I've got a day with them, he's opened the scriptures.
Do we, do we get that sort of urgency? Do we see the importance of the word for our lives? So important, that he doesn't seem super concerned when this lad Eutychus, which means lucky one, by the way, which I think is a joke.

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[9:25] That he's, he's probably about like eight to 14. That's probably what that word, boys sort of means. Just at the start of secondary school, maybe. He falls asleep.

It's midnight. It's not weird that he falls asleep. It's not even saying that Paul is particularly boring. He probably isn't. But he's a young lad, and he's been listening quite a long time, and he's following some of it, and it's late.
And he falls asleep in the window. And then he falls out of the window. Three stories up. Crashes to the ground, and unsurprisingly, dies.
Tragedy. Particularly for his parents, but for the whole believing community there. Tragedy. And so Paul goes down in great concern, and looks at him, and he's clearly dead, and he says, don't worry, his life is still in him, which sounds a lot like the kind of thing Jesus used to say when he met very clearly dead people.
Like the centurion's daughter, he's like, don't worry, she's alive, and they'll laugh at him. And he goes in, and he bends over, like all the prophets would, when raising someone to life.
[10:33] And essentially, we're not told it, but essentially he prays, and then the boy goes, oh! And he's like, it's okay. Let's, let's go back, I haven't finished my sermon.

And they go back upstairs, and then she says, they break bread next. They kind of carry on with their worship service, and calm everyone down a little bit, and then open up the Bible again. I mean, it's, it is the kind of, oh, every preacher breathes a sigh of relief, Paul too put people to sleep, kind of thing.
Yeah, but that's not actually what's going on. The thing that we're supposed to think, is, oh, so he's preaching the word, someone dies and rises. I mean, literally in this occasion, but are we supposed to think, does the word of God make people alive?
Yeah. The word of God resurrects us. Literally, in Eutychus' case. But see, for most of us, we're talking about spiritually, but the word, and the word himself, Jesus, resurrects us.
We should expect, when the Bible is open, that it's like, oh, dead things in me might come to life. Like, my life might be turned upside down. It might feel a little bit like, I just fell out the third story window, and woke up again.
[11:46] Like, it might, there might be an element of shock here, but then, oh, life is different. That's what we should expect, when the word is opened. He resurrects us.

Let me keep reading. This is verse 17 we've got to now. So Paul, he's, he's headed on. In that second, bit of that passage I read, with all those places, we don't know exactly why he didn't get on the ship, with all of his other friends, and sort of went over land.
To be honest, it could be something as simple as, he thought he'd get on the ship, the ship leaves first thing in the morning, but he's thinking, you know what, I should go check on Eutychus again, before we leave. So I'm going to miss the tides, I'll have to go over land.
Perhaps. Verse 17, now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus, where he, so we just heard, he decided not to go there. He sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church, to come to him.
And when they came to him, he said to them, you yourselves, know how I lived among you the whole time, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility, and with tears, and with trials that happened to me, through the plots of the Jews.
[13:01] How I did not shrink back, from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public, and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks, of repentance towards God, and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me, in every city, that imprisonment and afflictions await me.
But I do not account my life of any value, nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course, and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.
And now, behold, I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about, proclaiming my kingdom, will see my face again. Therefore, I testify to you to this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you, the whole counsel of God.
We'll pause there. What's he doing? He's not gone to Ephesus, so he's like, you know what, but I need to do the same thing for them. So I'm not going to get there, and do a kind of whole night, teaching them all the things they need to know.

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[14:31] So I'm going to call their elders to me instead. And then I'm going to sort of impart a few things, and then they can go, and do the teaching. So he calls them to him, in my life, it's probably like two to four days travel, depending on the weather.

He's a little bit, like when Commission, the group of churches we're part of, calls, us as elders, and those from other churches, together for something, and particularly those of us who are not paid by the church, will be like, okay, yeah, okay, I'll take some leave, and I'll get there.
It's a lot easier, because we're probably talking about a two-hour journey, and a car at most.
They've gone two to four days each way, no income during this time, whatever job they would do.
They're like, this is important. I'm going to get myself to Paul, to hear what he has to say. He gathers the elders to encourage them.
He tells them of the fact that he's like, I think I did well when I was with you, and I didn't shrink back, I told you the truth, I told you the Bible, and then expresses this sense, it's like, I don't think I'm going to see your faces again.
[15:39] I don't know exactly what is going to happen to me when I get to Jerusalem, but it's going to involve being in prison, and a lot of pain. And he has no expectation of seeing them again. He's like, we assume he expects what does happen, which is that he will be executed.

But he's like, the Spirit constrains me. Like, I have to go. The Holy Spirit is saying, I've got to go.
Okay. I'm going to face what I have to face.
And then he says, verse 24, but I do not account my life of any value, nor as precious to myself.
Wow.
Wow. Do not account my life of any value, nor as precious to myself. If only I may finish my course, and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, in other words, do what he told me to, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.
And now behold, I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will see my face again. Therefore, I testify to this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.
[16:50] I don't account my life of any value, he says. Instead, I use it to do the thing that God has called me to do.

For Paul, it's telling them the gospel of grace, and telling them the whole counsel of God. If you've got an NIV in front of you, you might say whole will of God. We'll get to that idea in a moment. But, can we say that?
Do not account my life of any value. I think it's a stunning thing to say. Deeply challenging. And of course the reality is, some of us might think, and I'd like to say, oh, we live in a country where no one's going to die for their faith.
You might face other challenges, but death is not going to be on the list. But you think, oh, but if I was, of course I'd stand. Now I do think that. But the thing is, you have no idea.
Until you face it, absolutely no idea at all. None of us do. We don't know how we'd respond. But can we say something like it? Can we say, I don't account my life of any value, nor is precious to myself.
[18:01] Not in the literal sense of, oh, I'm likely to die, but in the sense of, I choose, to give what I have, what I've been given, what, the things, that I am, my hopes, my dreams, my desires, what I own, for the purpose that God has given me.

I really hope that we can, but we should challenge ourselves with that. I think I can say with all honesty, that on more than one occasion, Helen and I have given up finance, and friendship, and comfort.
No, not our lives. But in one sense, our lives, for the call of God, and up sticks and gone somewhere else, or done other very hard things. I actually think we should all be able to say that.
No, he might not be about to call you to go and do some dramatic thing. But can we say, but my life is spent for the cause of God. I know for certain that some of you can, because I've seen enough of your lives to be like, yes, clearly.
But we should all challenge ourselves, regularly. And the answer can be, yes, that's good. And you should feel a sense of, oh, the Lord is for me. But is our life spent for the glory of God?
[19:17] And then Paul says to them, he tells them the gospel of grace. This is the gospel that because of Jesus' death on the cross, and his glorious resurrection, salvation is a free gift.

that you can receive if you go, yes, please. The Bible calls it repentance and faith, to turn away from your sin, turn towards Jesus. And you don't have to do anything.

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You don't have to receive the free gift that he's given you. Paul would teach it everywhere he went. And he says that he teaches them the whole counsel of God. So by that, he doesn't necessarily mean the whole Bible, though in one sense, yes, but the whole plan of God is what he means.
So God's plan in the world, and the gospel, to reconcile all things to himself in Christ, through the cross. The fact that everything in the world, fits into a grand story, intended, deliberate, written by God, that finds its center point in the cross.
And that the resurrection, is the grand turning point of history. Where everything is flipped on its head, and then suddenly we go, oh my word, I thought it was death, excuse me, no, that's wrong. [20:25] I thought it was life, then death. But it's not. Actually, the story of the world is death, then life. And everything, and a whole way of looking at the world, turns on its head.

It's like that grand story of all things, all of history wound into it. Every person's life that has ever lived, wound into it. Everything in the cosmos, wound into it.
Towards God's eventual aim, of reconciling all things to himself, in Christ. Christ. That's the whole counsel of God. It's like the whole story.
And Paul is able to say, I told you the whole story. And then he essentially commands these elders, you must tell everyone the whole story. Why does that matter?
Well, one reason it matters, not the only one, but one reason it matters, is this. Have you ever wondered what God's plan is for your life?
[21:28] I suspect a number of people in here have. And someone at some point has told you, God has a wonderful plan for your life. That's true. And then you've sort of been sat there thinking, but what is it?

Could you tell me? Am I allowed to know? Or perhaps, a few years later, thinking, if this is a wonderful plan, I'd like to have some words.
Because, I mean, let's be honest, it doesn't feel wonderful, does it? You're thinking, this is really hard. Or this thing that's happened to me, why would a good God do this? Or whatever the challenge might be.
You're thinking, I think I could come up with a better, wonderful plan, and it feels blasphemous to say it out loud, so I'm not going to, but that's what you're thinking down in your heart, right? It's sort of just, if this is a wonderful plan, well, well, just some of us left just in confusion, being like, have I missed it?
Is that how it works? Like, do I just have to kind of sit here and wait for God to say, do this, and then off I go and do the thing that I didn't really want to do, but I've been told to do?
[22:39] Is that how it works? The thing is, God does have a wonderful plan for your life, and you can read it. You can read it.

He has a wonderful plan for your life, and you can read it. The whole counsel of God means that your life fits into the whole plan of God in the world.
What's he about? He's about making Christ have many brothers, as he says in one of Paul's letters, such that lots and lots and lots of people look like Jesus.
That's the idea that all of us suddenly, oh, we look like the Son, so we can kind of be called his brother, whether we're a man or a woman, but we're like his brothers, because the Father loves the Son so much, he wants more of him.
That's the plan. And of reconciling all things to himself in Christ through the cross, so that eventually, in a new heaven and a new earth, all things are reconciled to God or done away with, so that there is order and peace and harmony in the whole cosmos.
[23:43] That's the plan. That's the wonderful plan God has for your life. That's actually really good news, because you don't have to guess. Now you might be like, but surely God has specifics in my...

Yes, sure. But what he's saying is, live this story. Live this story. He's saying, my plan is that you start to look like Jesus on the inside, that your character starts to look like Jesus, and you go about doing my mission in the world, of sharing my love, sure, but then also living like someone who is full of the love of God, living like the kingdom is here, both.
That's his plan for your life. Follow Jesus. And you might be like, but I've got all sorts of other questions. No, I understand. I'm sure you do. But his plan is that we live the story he's given us. Imagine actors on a stage, and if everyone has a different script, and they're all trying to do a different play, it looks like chaos, right?

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It's sort of, you give your line, and then no one responds to it, and you're sort of looking confused, and then someone popping up saying some other thing that doesn't seem to make any sense. The world sometimes looks like that, as though we're all living a different script.
[25:03] You're like, I've said the thing, no one's responding to it. Or maybe we feel like, oh, it's like improv. I don't know if you've ever seen improv, but there isn't a script. And there's sort of, and people who are good at it, it can be very funny, because they kind of bounce off one another.

But when they're not good at it, it's the most awkward thing you've ever seen. Because it's just like, there clearly isn't a script. They don't know what's going on. I don't know what's going on. None of it's funny. And you don't really know what's happening next.
We can feel, again, like God's plan for our lives is, do I just have to kind of make it up? No. You don't. Or, and I think actually this is probably the most common one, we can feel like, we're the actor on the stage, and we're just waiting for the director to tell us what to say next.
And so we stand in the middle of the stage, waiting. Thinking, someone will give me a line eventually, surely. God will eventually tell me what to do.
And again, no. And I do not want to disparage the prophetic. It's important. And sometimes the Lord will say, go and do this. And it will be confirmed through others and through the words.
[26:18] But instead, we are actors on a stage who've learned the script, and occasionally find a slightly improvised moment where we're like, ooh, wasn't quite expecting that, but I know the script, and so I know the general direction, and then we learn to use wisdom to go, so I think the next thing to say is this.

As in, we've read the script, someone else does say something surprising, because life throws up stuff at us, but we're like, I know the general sense of the story. I know the kind of person the Lord is asking me to be.
So I think I should respond like this. Or perhaps, oh, I didn't get that right. Okay, so I'll repent, but the Lord loves me, so on a go, we'll have another go. We have a script.
No, it's not all neatly laid out, and no, it's not really like acting on a stage, because, you know, life's messy, right? But, we have a sense of this is how we're supposed to live. This is why he wanted to tell them, the whole council. Because he's like, this is the grand story of all of history.
You're part of it. Live as though you are. Do your little bit. You're not the main character. Jesus is. And that's such good news, because a lot less pressure.
[27:28] But you get to play your part in the whole story. Okay. Let me read the last section. So it's verse 28.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flocks. He's talking to the elders again. In which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And for among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.
And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.
You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who are with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this, we may help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said he is more blessed to give than to receive.
[28:30] And when he said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all. They embraced Paul and they kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again.

And they accompanied him to the ship. This is the word of the Lord. So I'm not going to spend long talking about this, mostly because Tim Blaber preached this at our Together Weekend only a few months ago.
And you can listen to it on our website. He talked about the importance of being rooted in the word and the challenge of false teachers that is called wolves and what we should do about that. So I'm not particularly going to talk about that.
But do go and listen to it. It's very important for us. Just to say, he's talking specifically here to elders who are the men who, and he gives them three different things here. The men who govern,

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verse 28, he calls them the overseers.
It's one of the things they're called, the men who are overseers. And he calls them elders, which in the Old Testament is about judgment. They're the ones who sit at the gate and provide judgment for people.
[29:33] So those who judge with wisdom. And he also calls them, he doesn't call them shepherds, but he talks about the church as a flock, which is another word often used in the New Testament for elders. Shepherds, or the Latin is pastors.

That's where that comes from. But shepherds, which are those who essentially they provide direction. They say to the flock, come this way. And they provide boundaries. As in they say, that's a fence.
Please don't try and jump over it. It works very well with sheep. But anyway, so that's the kind of role of the elders, governing, judging, boundaries and direction.
The one thing I want to draw, well, two things I want to draw attention to. The first is, he says, he tells them, what he did was admonish the people with tears. Do we expect our elders to admonish us?
By which he means to say, by the way, stop that. That's not a very good idea. I think we live in a culture that finds that very challenging. The idea that someone could come to us and say, this is not a good idea.
[30:36] You should not live your life like this. It will not lead to life and flourishing. It is bad for you. I think we find that really hard. I think all of us find that really hard.

Even those of us who are nodding along and being like, oh yes, yes, you tell them. No, I think we all find it really hard, to the idea that someone might, in some sense, give us, say, don't live like that. Now the things to say are, elders only get their authority from the word. So only when they tell you something the Bible says, should you listen to it. And the majority of that is probably through preaching, but also through one-on-one conversation.
But we are given the role to admonish people. That should sober all of us. It sobers me, but it kind of, oh, okay, the Lord has said that some people should sometimes speak into my life and say the word says, do something different.
We should be open to that. Inevitably, we're open to the idea of it happening to other people. But we should be open to it happening to us, too. And the last comment to make, you'll know that we're in a position where we would love to appoint some new elders in the next year or two.
[31:46] In 1 Timothy, it tells us that to aspire to be an elder is a noble task. My prayer through the week has been, even when I just make these very brief comments about what eldership is, there will be some men in the room who something just stirs in you and you're like, I just wonder, who would want to do that?

No one would want to do that. But, but maybe I need to. And I'm saying that because you wouldn't identify that if I didn't say it. And you don't need to do anything with it right now other than pray. But we do believe that that will be happening amongst us. So, to finish, Paul says, do what I did. Tell people the Bible. And do what I did.
Teach the whole story. And people, do what he asks you to do, which is live that story. Live as though the grand story of the whole universe was, oh, right in the middle, right at the crux that's deliberate is the cross.
And that Jesus' death and resurrection is the turning point of all things and also the centre of your own life. Because it is. What's going to happen now is the band are going to come and we are going to worship him more, which essentially is we are going to repeat that story to each other in song.
[33:03] Because you need to get it under your skin. Because the cross of Jesus has changed all things. why don't we stand together if we're able.

I'll pray and then Ben will lead us. Lord Jesus, thank you so much that you have not left us without a script, without a sense of, oh, here's what life should look like.
Help us learn it. Gift us wisdom to know how to apply it. Get the gospel into us, Lord Jesus, by your spirit so that we are gospel people. So that your word is in our bones.
Jesus, we love you. We're so delighted that you have come to rescue us. Thank you that you would. But help us. Help us follow you.
Help us to live your story. Help us to keep our eyes fixed on you. Help us to obey as you call us to live differently. Amen. Amen.

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