

Church Weekend Away

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[0 : 0 0] There are moments in the history of a church that are highly significant.! You can have moments of breakthrough, moments of crisis, moments of rejoicing, moments of! moments of weeping, moments of great momentum, moments of challenge.

! I am thrilled for you as a church because I've got to know Tim and Helen fairly well over the last year. I believe that you are receiving in this couple an outstanding, godly, passionate man and woman who I believe will make a huge difference to you in terms of strengthening your community and helping you in all the things that God's calling you to do.

Can you just turn in your Bibles to Acts chapter 20 which is going to be our main passage. I'll read from Acts chapter 20 in a moment. It was quite an amazing drive here from Winchester this morning just driving through the countryside and the farms and then arriving here and greeted by that massive bull who you just can't miss as you enter and they got the fattened calf ready. And just what an amazing venue to be here as a church. So it's a real privilege and treat to be. And also just to say worship was wonderful and it's so good. I do enjoy preaching in different churches and you do see different styles. You see a lot of consistencies. But one of the things that I just want to encourage you with is that your worship is very mature in terms of the gifts, in terms of the songs you're singing. It did me good worshipping. So I just want to say well done to those that were leading. It was outstanding. Brilliant. I really appreciated that. I asked Andrew just as I arrived, I said, how old is the church? Don't give away the answer.

Who thinks they know how old this church is? How long it's been around for? I'm seeing one tentative hand at the back. So what's your name? Dave. How old do you think the church is, Dave? Correct. I'm very great for history. Okay. I'm very great for church. Well done, Dave.

76 years. And I said to Andrew, I asked about how it started, how did the church begin? And Andrew said, well, I think it was a group of people living in Alton who were very concerned about the theological drift of churches at the time. There was a liberal drift was how Andrew, I think, put it in terms of the gospel. And so Christians got together and affirmed, we want to be a church, a community rooted in the word of God, uncompromising with the gospel, unflinching with the gospel. What a fantastic foundation for a church. And 76 years later, you remain rooted in the word of God and committed to a faithful proclamation of the gospel. Amen. And if the Lord Jesus doesn't return inside the next 76 years, wouldn't it be very cool if this church is still around in 76 years time?

[3 : 3 1] What we're looking at today is key to that possibility. Appointing a new elder is a key part of not only strengthening you now, but strengthening you for many years to come. And the passage that we're about to read together is the Apostle Paul gathering Ephesian elders, the elders of the church in Ephesus, who he'd spent three years with, and who is about to leave and never see again. Now for the Apostle Paul, the most precious, cherished thing in his life, besides, of course, his walk with God, were the churches that he was involved in starting and caring for.

Now what's the most precious thing you have? If you're privileged to be a parent and you entrust your children to a babysitter, you're not just going to be casual, hopefully, with who you entrust that responsibility to because these are precious children.

Whatever the prized item is, if you are going to leave it in the care of someone, you want to be fully confident that they're going to be faithful and trustworthy.

And so this, for the Apostle Paul, is the moment where he says to these guys, I'm going, here's what I want you to hear. This is farewell discourse. So let's read it together. Acts chapter 20, from verse 17.

Now from Miletus, 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.

[5 : 32] How I did not shrink 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 toward 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's imprisonment and afflictions await me.

But I do not account my life of any value, nor is 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 the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore, I testify to you 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. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

[6 : 55] I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And from 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 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. You are with me in all things. I have shown you that by working hard in this way, we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

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 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. All right, let's pray. Father, thank you for these words. Thank you for the power that's in them. And I pray that you would speak to us today in a way that really would bring strength to this church.

[8 : 23] That would affirm the things this church loves. And we ask for its protection from an evil one who would want to take this seed and scatter it and destroy it.

But may it take root and produce a harvest for Harvest Church in Jesus name. Amen. A couple of years ago, I reached the grand old age of 40 and did what every self-respecting middle-aged man does on such occasions.

I treated myself with a trip to see my local GP. I asked for the works. Full MOT, blood, cholesterol, BMI, everything.

I wanted to find out just how bad it was. And so they did the tests. When you turn 40, you can have this path check done on the NHS. And I waited the results to come back and the results came back. And there was one massive peak. So my serum ferritin measured 10 times the healthy range.

[9 : 35] I don't know if there are any doctors here who are immediately diagnosing me. There might be one or two. So 10 times the normal range, which was alarming. So a series of further tests.

And I was diagnosed with a genetic condition called hemochromatosis, which is where my body overloads on iron. So I'm like the opposite of an anemic person.

So the way in which this is treated is by having what's called venesections. So I have blood taken out of my body. It was bizarre. A year ago, I was sat having blood taken out as this anemic guy next to me was having blood put back into it.

And linked us together to save a lot of hassle. And so my levels managed, thankfully, managed to come down. Now the thing with this condition, if it's left untreated, you get all kinds of nasty symptoms, but ultimately causes organ damage and can be fatal, can kill you.

People have died from it, not realizing that they have the condition. So the way it is treated now for the rest of my life is every three or four months I get to donate blood. So it goes and actually serves a purpose, thankfully.

[10 : 43] And I should be okay, Lord willing. What possible relevance does this have to the passage that I just read? Well, let me draw your attention to verse 28.

Let's just read this again. It comes as the kernel in this passage. Firstly, pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Firstly, pay careful attention to yourselves. Now, whilst Paul is primarily here addressing elders, this is relevant for all of us. But it's particularly a challenge to those who are given responsibility for the church, to elders.

In the first verse of chapter 20, Paul gathers all the disciples. Here he's gathering the elders who he's holding accountable. But this is relevant to all of us. Pay close attention to yourselves.

Our daily responsibility is to see to it that our hearts are filled with delight in devotion toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:00] First and foremost, my greatest daily task is to find myself happy in God. And to look primarily to him.

And not to anything else that he has made, which is good, but to him, the creator of all things. What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Why do you exist? You exist to enjoy God and through loving God, through enjoying God, through living your life devoted to him.

You glorify him. That's why you are on planet Earth. That's why you have breath in your lungs. The Lord wants you to enjoy him, to find your, as we were hearing, your satisfaction in him and him ultimately.

Pay close attention to yourselves. So I believe, you know, this is a great health check. So a health check for any Christian and a health check for any eldership team and any church is first and foremost, I'd say, how's the heart doing before God?

[13:14] Now, you think of when Jesus was with the disciples after his resurrection and they were having that breakfast on the beach. And Peter was there with him.

There was kind of a lull in the conversation. And Peter's eyes and Jesus's eyes locked once again. Do you remember the last time it happened? It was after a rooster was crowing, which we conveniently have in the background.

And Peter just denied Jesus three times. And so here on the beach, three times, Jesus asks him, Peter, do you love me?

Tend my lands. Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep. Peter, do you love me? Tend my lands. The key question for Tim today, the key question for all of us, do you love me? Do you love me? Yeah. Because it's so easy for us to get caught up in our function and our doing.

[14:20] And we know this. And to find our identity in our function and in our doing, in our jobs, in our careers, in what we do in church or don't do in church, what we do for God or don't do for God.

And if we are wired in that way, we're going to be like this all the time. But the Lord would ask you a simple question today. Do you love me? Because what you do for me is going to be directly implicated by how you answer that question.

Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? Because he really loves his sheep, okay? Yeah. He really loves his sheep. So pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, all the flock.

Not just those that give you good sermon feedback, right? Not just those that you particularly like. I'm sure you guys love all the people in this church, right?

But there can be times when you receive criticism and that happens in church life and that's appropriate.

[15:27] You as members of this church, you need to feel free to raise concerns. These guys need you to encourage, but they also need you to say, I think we're struggling in this area.

And they need to be able to hear that. Because we are called as shepherds to care for the flock and to see that we're healthy. If we are aware of a symptom that's unhealthy, it needs to be addressed and dealt with because it could be fatal.

If it breeds, if it spreads. Or the flock, which the Holy Spirit made you overseas. This is a Holy Spirit moment for you, Tim. Yeah. I know there have been all kinds of sequence of events leading to this day, but the Lord is sovereign over who is appointed as an elder of his flock.

It's a Holy Spirit moment. Now listen to this. If it wasn't already feeling a weighty enough task, listen to this qualification.

This is staggering. Listen to this. Which, to care for the church of God, which he, who's he? God, obtained with his own blood.

[16:42] Now just let that sink in. This is his church, which he obtained, which he acquired with his own blood.

That's about as Christian a statement as you can find anywhere. A God who has blood. Blood which was spilled. Blood which was poured out.

What kind of a God is this? It's an incarnate God. This is a God who took on flesh. This is a God who really warped this planet. This is a God who really lived as we have lived.

Not only that, but a God who bled and who was crucified and who suffered the agonies of crucifixion and the shame of the cross to have you as his precious lands.

Do you realize how infinitely precious you are to God? Yeah. He has grabbed hold of you through the spilling of his blood.

[17:57] You can't have a higher, loftier value. There's nothing more valuable than the blood of God. The spilt blood of Jesus Christ.

So that's how we who are pastors and elders are to see those that we care for. We are to see one another through the lenses of Christ crucified and through the agonies of Christ upon the cross.

And I am to see each one of you as individuals that Jesus Christ bled for. And that's going to change how I react to you if you're irritating me.

It should do. That's going to change how we bear with one another when we have disagreements. It's going to affect how we work through differences.

And also, Jesus bled for these elders as well.

[19:05] So your value, Tim, is not to be found in your ministry first, but in the fact that you also are one that Jesus bled and died for.

And that's going to be the most critical. And that's going to be the most critical. Because let me just be really honest with you. It's so easy and perilous to be in leadership in God's church if your eyes are not fully fixed on him.

And if your heart is not fed by him. And if your delight is not in him. And if your worth is not centered in who he is and what he's done. So that the people that are most criticized in the Bible are the shepherds of the flock.

Ezekiel 34. I'm not going to go there now. Just read that chapter. Abusive shepherds of God's people. Now, as I said right at the start, God's been kind to you in that you've been served by excellent pastors over decades.

And Andrew coming, Andrew and Emma coming. How many years ago was it now, Andrew? Nine and a half. Nine and a half years ago. Haven't they been doing an outstanding job of caring for you and shepherding them?

[20:20] And also many others. But I appreciate you have Sean, you have Rob, and now Tim to join the team.

And this is not a church either that sees the few as being necessary for the health of the church. We know because you're a well-taught church that we're a priesthood of all believers.

There's no hierarchy in the kingdom of God whatsoever. But these ones have come forward and said, we will take up that responsibility to serve, to care, to lay our lives down for this precious flock. That is his anyway. And it is a responsibility, but it's a great, great privilege. Pay careful attention to yourselves and all the flock.

And I don't have time to go anywhere near doing justice to all of the things mentioned in this passage. But there are several things that really stand out to me about the Apostle Paul's example.

[21:27] And he sets this example. This is how I was when I was with you. You know, he said right at the beginning. You know how I was with you. Like, they knew him. The Apostle Paul wasn't one of these preachers who just would only arrive for his sermon and then disappear off to the green room and swig champagne or whatever it is that goes on there.

Some people haven't got a clue what a green room is. I can go blank places and say, what? It doesn't matter. They knew him. He was in their homes. He was in their homes.

And the thing that gets emphasised is that he was a particular type of shepherd. He was a shepherd who felt deeply. He felt deeply.

He was a shepherd who fed faithfully. But third, he was a sheep who followed boldly. And so, under shepherds, elders, are called to be those who feel deeply.

They're called to be those who feed faithfully. But they're called to follow boldly. They're called to follow boldly. So he, several times, he used the word tears.

[22 : 36] How I was with you with all humility and with tears. He wept among them. They saw his heart breaking. They saw him weeping.

Not just every now and then. He says daily. Like you saw my tears daily. Day and night. I was with you through tears.

The apostle Paul was not a man who hid his vulnerability and his weakness. This was a stiff upper lip. Kind of middle class British resolve to just be stoic.

This was a man who loved so much. And part of that was a willingness for his emotions to be seen. Humble. Vulnerable. Weak.

Real. You lead well as a Christian. If you lead with a limb. Yeah. I'll say that again. You lead well as a Christian.

[23 : 37] If you lead with a limb. A.W. Tozer said. Beware the Christian leader who doesn't walk with a limb.

So please don't expect these guys to be perfect. Please don't expect them to get everything right. Please don't expect them to be some kind of all singing, all dancing entertainer.

They are asked by God to be godly, faithful, diligent. To love Jesus first. To care for you.

But they are going to have weaknesses. And I hope you get to know those. I hope you can get to know those. The Apostle Paul went on to say, I've learned to delight in my weaknesses.

Isn't it an amazing thing to say? I've learned to delight in them. So Paul felt deeply. The second thing I just mentioned was, he fed faithfully.

[24 : 41] He was utterly committed to the word of God. Several times he said this. Verse 20. I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable.

And teaching you in public and from house to house. In verse 27 again. I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Why would he say that twice?

Why would he say, I did not shrink? Unless there's a genuine temptation at times to shrink back from the word of God. Yeah. Why would he feel the need to say that?

Unless he's aware that not only for himself, but for these ones who he's entrusting his responsibility to. There are going to come times where there are going to be certain passages of scripture you're going to shrink back from.

Or feel I shouldn't teach that. Romans 1. 1 Timothy 2. Ephesians 5. There are many others.

[25 : 45] Where we read things and we go, oh my word, that's in the Bible. And the temptation is to shrink back. Why? Because as those words are brought, as those words are taught, there's going to be a reaction.

And that's why, sadly, many churches stopped teaching the Bible altogether. And that's why this church began. Because churches thought what we need to do is not primarily teach the word of God, but find words that society likes.

That's not what you're, that is not what we are called to be. We're called to be what? A city upon a hill. Yeah. Salt and light. To make a difference and to stand out. Yeah.

There's a real warning that he brings here. Verse 29. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

And from among your own selves will arise men, speaking twisted things to draw the disciples after them. That's a really sobering passage.

[27 : 00] Is that only going to be an issue for this particular church? Is it possible that fierce wolves might come into this church? Is it possible that fierce wolves may be in this church?

Is it possible that you should feel the weightiness of that? And it's important to then ask the question, where's my heart in relation to the word of God?

So how can we discern the attack of wolves? Because I don't think it's like a great big Morgren-esque from Lion, which is the Wardrobe, and this kind of scary wolf, kind of werewolf comes in and everyone goes, that's a wolf, obviously, that's a wolf.

No, there's a subtlety to this. It's a wolf in sheep's clothing evidently here. So how can we discern it? Here's what I believe the Apostle Paul is referring to, this type of thing, where leaders and teachers are increasingly feeling pressure to accommodate the current whim and fancy of a particular culture and to dial down on aspects of what's explicit in Scripture in order to speak the philosophy and the ideologies of this current world.

And so this is how it manifests itself. Someone will come over and say, I don't think we should be, I think we should change this. I think we should teach this differently.

[28 : 40] I think we should do this differently. I think we're out of step. Now, the next question is, out of step with what? Now, if you're coming, you're saying, because look at this passage of Scripture.

Look what it says here. Excellent response. But if you're coming and saying, well, that church does it that way, and that church does it that way. See, we each have a responsibility.

We're so privileged that we have the word of God before us. You might genuinely feel like this church is deviating from Scripture, in which case you must bring accountability.

But if you're coming and you're trying to initiate some kind of shift, not on the basis of what you're seeing in Scripture, but something out there. Now, beware, you might be fitting into this category here.

You might be. And if your leaders are saying, we're trying to faithfully obey Scripture, and they're showing you how, and they're directing you to the passage, and they're explaining the passage, you should honor that.

[29 : 48] Because it's so easy just to blend in. The easiest thing to do is to be like the world around us. Okay? I'm seeing lots of nodding heads, so I don't think this is particularly controversial, but we can presume upon these things.

We can presume upon these things. And whilst I think, and I'm thrilled that God is doing work in this nation at the moment, where more and more people are attending church, more and more people are getting saved, it really is actually quite an exciting time.

It hasn't been for a long time. And the places that are seeing this growth, the places that are seeing more coming along, are those that are being faithful to the words of God.

And that was the challenge that the Apostle Paul left. The challenge I bring to the elders here, and to each of you, don't shrink back from declaring the whole counsel of God.

The whole counsel of God. And when you're in church, and a passage is read, and something is spoken, and you're like, oh my word, how are they going to handle this one? You should also say, well done for reading these passages, and pray for them, as they then attempt to teach it, that God would help.

[31 : 00] Because it is, do you know what? This is not an easy book to work with. It isn't. Let me give you an example. A few months back, maybe a year back actually, I was doing a training course.

And in the morning, I was quoting from James 3, where it says, not many of you should be teachers. Not many of you should. The tongue is like a wildfire blazing.

And I spoke about the necessity to help us be well equipped in the teaching of the Word of God.

That we shouldn't just be casual with it. We shouldn't just casually just throw it out there.

I then departed, and didn't do the second part of the day, and someone else came in. I messaged one of our worship leaders, and I said, how's it going? And this person replied back and said, well, it's going well.

He's a little bit different to you. And I was like, oh right, how so? He said, well, he's more of a just let them have a go approach. Now I couldn't resist the temptation.

[32 : 02] So I replied, are you happy to let me have a go on the drums tomorrow? Are you happy to let me have a go at your open heart surgery? Or flying your aeroplane on holiday?

You see my point. I don't think this is just let anybody have a go. I don't think this is what the Apostle Paul is saying.

Now don't hear what I'm not saying. This is your book. Our book. We are all to read it. We are all to do our best to understand how we teach well.

Our family first. Ourselves. Ourselves. But there are a few who will be called to teach in this context. Not many. A few. And if it becomes a pass the parcel, I'm going to be very concerned for the health of this church.

I think that's a very modern idea. Well, just be inclusive. Just let lots of people out there go. No, I think quite clearly Paul doesn't see it that way.

[33 : 05] But we are to equip and help one another in the handling of this precious book. And gifts will emerge. And there will be occasions where someone will preach for the first time.

And that can be a healthy step if it's gone through that kind of diligence. And he was a shepherd who fed faithfully. But finally, he was a sheep who followed boldly.

He says this. I'm going to Jerusalem. I'm constrained by the spirit. I love that phrase. I'm constrained by this.

I'm not constrained by my society. I'm not constrained even by peer pressure or whatever it might be. I'm constrained by the spirits calling me. I've got to go to Jerusalem. Not knowing what's going to happen to me there except the Holy Spirit testifies to me that in every city imprisonment and afflictions await me.

But I do not account my life of any value, not precious to myself. If only I may finish my course in the ministry I've received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

[34 : 13] Do you know what's happening here? Paul is about to leave this church he loves, spent three years with, and he's heading towards Jerusalem and he knows prison, persecutions.

He knows. The Holy Spirit's been telling him that. And as we go through Acts, we find his friends go, don't do it. Stay here. Why would you go there? Why would you let that happen to yourself?

In Acts chapter 21 he says, why are you breaking my heart? It's literally a phrase, you're breaking my heart, my friends. Don't you know I'm willing to die for Jesus? Don't you realise he's called what ultimately I value, not my own body?

Don't you fear him who hurts the body, but rather he who holds the keys of death and hell. He has this right fear of God, love of God, fear of God, awe of God, and he is led like the most obedient sheep.

Paul is that, he's an under shepherd, but before he's an under shepherd, he's a sheep, he's a follower of his good shepherd.

[35 : 19] So are you, so am I, so are we. Before we have any responsibility, we are called to be simple, obedient disciples of Jesus Christ.

To trust him, to be willing to let him lead us, to be willing to even suffer on account of our commitment to following him. He said, it's the gospel of the grace of God.

In other words, I just can't wait to get this gospel message out into the places where I'm sent. You were hearing about that yesterday, the five benefits of evangelism.

Listen, what a privilege you and I have to share the life transforming words of the gospel. And he's going to use you to do that. You're up for it.

And what a privilege that is. He's leading you into those opportunities and into those spaces. The apostle Paul was a sheep. He followed well.

[36 : 22] And just finally, finally, finally, verse 37. There was much weeping on the part of all.

They embraced Paul and kissed him. I want you just to see this is no, Paul was no professional preacher. He was a heartfelt, heart giving friend.

And he did this in the context of friendship. They're friends. They loved each other. They hugged, they kissed, they embraced. They were friends. And that's how we're to do team.

And this is how we're to lead. We're not single shepherds wandering off the lawn on some hill on our own. No, that's not the biblical picture of shepherding. You shepherd together with others.

But you shepherd together. One of the main reasons why I'm encouraged to bring help to this church is because I'm friends with Tim and Heather. I want to be good friends to them and to Andrew and to Emma.

[37 : 25] So I'm good friends here as well. And to take up that atom from John Groves, who's a good friend of mine, who's trying to wind down. It's easier said than done with John.

You probably will still see him coming back. But it's friendship. Friendship. We're co-workers. Just read through Romans 16. The whole list of people that Paul did this with.

Why is it that way? Because God has always been in friendship. Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Beautiful, loving friendship. I'm going to finish that. I want to pray. I think the band will leave this in some way.

I want to pray. Just stay seated for a moment. Because as soon as we stand, we lose concentration. The band can come. You guys can come. I did ask you to do that. Mixed messages. Okay, why don't we just close our eyes.

There's a lot that we've covered. Yeah. But it's that verse, verse 28, I want to just have resonating in our hearts as we finish.

[38 : 27] Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

So, Father, I just pray for each of us here. Each of us here. Lord, you know how easily distracted we are.

I thank you for what we heard earlier on. You are the Savior who forgives. You're the Savior who forgives when we fail.

He doesn't cast us off. A bruised reed you will not break. A smoking flax you won't snuff out. So, however we find ourselves, whether we're feeling strong in our faith or weak, I pray draw near to us. And may the major preoccupation of our lives be to find our hearts happy in you. Because, Lord, when we get that right, everything else follows suit.

[39 : 28] First and foremost, worshippers of the living God. I pray this over this church and each of us, for myself, for Tim, this eldership team, for this church.

Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Oh no, why don't we stand here? We'll sing a song and then we'll get everyone in and we'll pray for Tim.