Men's Devotional, November 1, 2026

"You Yourselves Know"

Acts 20:17–38: Paul's Farewell to the Ephesian Elders

The Spine of the Study

Driving question: If this were your last hour with men you had poured three years into, what would you spend it on? Paul had exactly that hour, and he spent it establishing what it had cost him to be able to say *"I am innocent of the blood of all men"* (v. 26), and handing that same burden to the men in front of him (v. 28). The question the study walks toward: could any man in this room close three years the way Paul closed these?

The farewell is not a series of topics. It is one argument. Paul establishes a standard by pointing at his own three years (vv. 18–21), states the verdict that his conduct earned him (vv. 26–27), and then hands the identical burden to the men in front of him (v. 28). Verse 18 exists to make verse 28 unanswerable. Track the tears and you can see the argument move: his tears in v. 19, his tears in v. 31, and finally their weeping in v. 37. Three times, and by the last one the weight has changed hands.

What Paul does not do is as instructive as what he does. He does not review doctrine; that work is finished and stated in the past tense (v. 27). He does not appoint a successor; he commends them to God and to the word of His grace (v. 32) and leaves nothing in his own place. He does not soften the hard news. He tells them chains await him (v. 23), that they will not see his face again (v. 25), and that from among their own number men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples (v. 30). And he does not leave them without hope: he commends them 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* (v. 32). When they weep, he does not take any of it back. He prays and boards the ship.

What he wants them to have when he is gone is not information. It is vigilance grounded in cost: his cost (three years, tears, plots, hands) and Christ's cost (purchased with His own blood, v. 28). Both prices are named to make the same demand: guard this.

¶ Leader's discipline: this study is for reading and discussion, not a lecture. These notes are the spade-work behind the questions, not a manuscript. If the room takes a movement somewhere the notes do not go, follow the room. The questions in the blue boxes are the ones to actually ask aloud; everything else is here so you are not caught flat when someone pushes.

Frame Before Reading (5 minutes)

Read v. 16 first, on its own, before anything else. *Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.*

He sailed past Ephesus to save days. Then he stopped at Miletus anyway and sent thirty miles up the road for these men, and waited for them to walk it. A man in a hurry, who already knows that bonds and afflictions await him (v. 23), spends days he does not have in order to say goodbye. Nothing in this passage is casual. Every word after v. 17 was purchased with time he was desperate to keep.

The lobby flyer poses the opening question below, plus two more; some men will arrive already carrying them.

→ **Open with this:** If you knew this was the last hour you would ever have with the men you had poured three years into, what would you spend it on? Let them answer before reading a word of the farewell. Then read vv. 17–38 straight through and let them compare their list to Paul's. The gap is the study.

The Six Movements

Movement 1: "You yourselves know" (vv. 18–21), 12–15 min

Paul opens by putting his own conduct into evidence and inviting cross-examination from the only men on earth positioned to contradict him. *You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time* (v. 18). Three years, and he will stake the entire account on their memory of it. Almost no one can do that. The verse does not argue; it simply stands there.

Notice the order of what he lists. Not content first; character and cost first: *serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials* which came upon him through the plots of the Jews (v. 19). Only then the content, and even

then it is framed by what he refused to do: *I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable* (v. 20). The verb (*hypostello*) is a word for drawing back, withdrawing, shrinking away: the picture of a man who does not flinch from a thing he would rather not say. And the scope: *publicly and from house to house*, to Jews and Greeks alike (vv. 20–21). No audience exempted, no venue skipped, no topic withheld.

→ **Ask:** Paul says "you yourselves know." Who in your life could you say that to, and would they agree?

Then: He lists tears and trials before he lists teaching. Why that order? What does it mean that his credibility rests on what it cost him rather than on what he knew?

Then, if the room is ready: What have you shrunk from declaring, and what was the reason? Not the excuse. The reason.

¶ *This movement will likely stop the room, and that is correct. Do not rush it to keep a schedule no one imposed. But do not let it terminate in self-flagellation either. It is the premise, not the conclusion. The question "could I say that?" is answered in vv. 26–27 and then handed over in v. 28. Keep the thread live.*

Movement 2: The course and the ministry (vv. 22–24), 6–8 min

And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me (vv. 22–23). He does not know the details. He knows the category. That is worse, not better: a man walking toward a certainty whose shape he cannot see.

Then v. 24: *But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus.* The image is athletic: *teleiosai ton dromon*, to complete the race, to bring the course to its end. He will use it again when he actually gets there: *I have finished the course, I have kept the faith* (2 Tim. 4:7). A man who measures his life by whether an assignment gets completed has already answered most of the questions the rest of us are still negotiating.

→ **Ask:** Paul knows something bad is coming and cannot see what. Is that harder or easier than knowing exactly?

Then: "I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself." Is that a statement of despair or of freedom? What is the difference?

Then: He measures his life by finishing a course he did not design and a ministry he received. What would it change if you measured yours the same way?

Movement 3: Innocent of blood (vv. 25–27), 10–12 min

Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God (vv. 26–27). This is the verdict Movement 1 was building toward, and the language is not Paul's invention. It is Ezekiel's watchman (Ezek. 33:1–6): the man on the wall who sees the sword coming. If he blows the trumpet and the people ignore it, their blood is on their own heads. If he sees the sword and stays silent, *his blood I will require from the watchman's hand.*

Read the ground of Paul's innocence carefully, because it is easy to misread. The "for" in v. 27 gives the reason, and the reason is *I declared*, not *they listened*. The watchman is not judged by the response. He is judged by whether he blew the trumpet. That is enormously freeing and enormously binding at the same time: you are not responsible for the outcome, and you are entirely responsible for the warning.

Then the phrase to work: *the whole purpose of God* (*pasan ten boulen tou Theou*). Whole. Paul's claim in v. 20 was that he withheld nothing profitable; his claim here is that he withheld nothing at all. Which raises the question the room will feel immediately: who decides what is not profitable to say? Because in practice, every man who has ever gone quiet on a hard subject has told himself it was not the right time, not the right audience, not profitable just now.

→ **Ask:** Is there such a thing as guilt for silence? Where does Scripture say so besides here?

Then: Paul's innocence rests on his declaring, not on their receiving. What does that free you from, and what does it obligate you to?

The hard one: Paul withheld nothing profitable (v. 20) and nothing at all (v. 27). But surely not everything is said to everyone at every moment; Paul himself fed milk before meat (1 Cor. 3:2). So where is the line between wisdom about timing and shrinking back? How would you know which one you were doing?

¶ *That last question is the sharpest one in the study and the room will not settle it. Do not let them settle it falsely in either direction. The text gives a test worth naming: Paul's silences, if any, were never self-protective. His speaking cost him plots, tears, and eventually chains. The man who withholds a hard truth at cost to himself is doing something different from the man who withholds it at cost to someone else. Ask which direction the cost is flowing. That is usually the tell.*

Movement 4: Shepherd the flock (v. 28), 12–15 min

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. The densest verse in the chapter, and the center of the study.

First, the three words. Paul sent for the elders of the church (*presbyterous*, v. 17). He tells those same men the Spirit made them overseers (*episkopous*) in order to shepherd (*poimainein*, the verb behind "pastor") the flock. One group of men, three terms, one verse apart. Elder speaks to maturity, overseer to function, shepherd to the work itself. There is no hierarchy here and no fourth office; the New Testament uses these interchangeably (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1–2, where Peter does exactly the same thing: *elders… shepherd… exercising oversight*; and Titus 1:5–7, where Paul appoints elders and then describes the overseer). If the room wants to work this, it works cleanly and quickly.

Second, the order. "Be on guard for yourselves" comes first, and the flock second. Not humility for its own sake: v. 30 explains why. The threat is coming from inside this group. A shepherd who is not watching himself is the thing the flock most needs watching for.

An example in one scene. Peter was one of those "who were reputed to be pillars" (Gal. 2:9). At Antioch he ate with the Gentiles, until certain men came from James. Then "he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision" (Gal. 2:12). He did not stumble alone: "The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy" (Gal. 2:13). Paul "opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned" (Gal. 2:11), and he spoke to Cephas "in the presence of all," because they "were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). This is why the order in v. 28 matters. When the man the flock watches stops watching himself, the flock follows him. And it is Peter who later writes, "I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder… shepherd the flock of God among you" (1 Pet. 5:1–2).

Third, the appointment. *The Holy Spirit has made you overseers.* Not the congregation, not Paul, not seniority. Whatever process appointed them (and there was one: Titus 1:5; Acts 14:23), Paul attributes the office itself to the Spirit. That cuts two directions: it dignifies the work beyond any human mandate, and it means the men cannot treat the position as theirs to define.

Fourth, the ground. Why shepherd? Not because you hold the office. Because of what the flock cost: *the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.* Paul does not motivate them by duty, authority, or reputation. He tells them what the sheep are worth by naming the price. Everything in the verse turns on that clause.

¶ Textual note, for your own preparation; use only if the room raises it. The Greek of the last clause (tou haimatos tou idiou) can be read "with His own blood" (NASB, KJV) or "with the blood of His own," i.e., of His own Son (ESV margin, NET). Both readings are defensible and the manuscripts are also divided between "church of God" and "church of the Lord." It is an honest question and worth answering honestly if asked. But note that the point of the verse survives either reading intact: the church was bought at the price of divine blood, and that is why these men must guard it. Do not let a translation question consume the shepherding question. If it comes up, name it, answer it plainly, and steer back.

→ **Ask:** Why does “be on guard for yourselves” come before “and for all the flock”?

Then: Peter’s slip was not a sermon. It was where he sat to eat, and who he avoided. Where in an ordinary week does what we do teach the people watching us more than what we say?

Then: Paul grounds the command in what the church cost rather than in the elders’ authority. What changes about the work if the motive is the price rather than the position?

Then: The Spirit made them overseers. What does that mean for a man who wants the office, and for a man who does not want it?

Movement 5: The wolves are you (vv. 29–31), 10–12 min

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them (vv. 29–30). Two threats, and the second is the one that should stop the room. The wolves from outside are expected. The wolves from among your own selves (from this group of elders, standing at Miletus, hearing this sentence) are not.

Read what Paul names as the motive, because it is not what most men assume: *to draw away the disciples after them.* Followers. Not error for error’s sake: the perverse speech is the instrument, and a following is the aim. That distinction matters enormously and it is the most practical thing in the passage. A man can be wrong and not be a wolf. A man can be right and be one, if what he is building is a following rather than a flock. The test Paul gives is not primarily doctrinal; it is about where the sheep end up standing: behind him, or behind Christ.

Then v. 31: *Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.* The tears return a second time. And notice *each one*: three years of individual, personal, night-and-day warning, man by man. This is what it costs to be able to say v. 26.

→ **Ask:** Paul gives one verse to the wolves from outside and one to the wolves from inside. Why does the second come with the warning "from among your own selves"?

Then: The motive named is "to draw away the disciples after them." How would you tell, in real time, the difference between a man who is teaching what he believes and a man who is gathering a following?

The one to sit with: Paul says this to elders, about elders. He is not warning them about someone else. What question does a man have to ask himself, honestly, to make sure he is not the wolf? And when was the last time you asked it?

¶ *Diagnostic worth having ready if the room wants a handle: the wolf cannot afford to lose the argument, because the argument is the door the sheep walk through. An honest student can afford to lose it. So the question is not "am I right?" Every man believes he is. The question is: would I still hold this if no one came with me? And: what would I do if my strongest argument collapsed tomorrow? A man who can answer those cleanly is not building a following, whatever else he may be doing. This applies to the leader as much as anyone in the room, and it will land better if you say so.*

Movement 6: The commendation and the ship (vv. 32–38), 8–10 min

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 (v. 32). This is Paul's entire exit strategy, and it is worth pausing on what is not in it. No successor. No structure. No plan for staying in touch. He hands them to God and to the word, and says the word is what is able to build them up. He is leaving and putting nothing in his own place, because nothing needs to go there.

Then his hands (vv. 33–34): *I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me.* "You yourselves know" again: the same phrase that opened the address, now closing it. The evidence bracket is deliberate. He began with what they watched him do and ends with the same appeal, and this time he holds up his hands as the exhibit.

And then a saying of the Lord Jesus that none of the four Gospels records: *remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'* (v. 35). The last thing Paul quotes to these men is a

sentence of Christ's that no evangelist recorded. It survives because Paul said it at Miletus.

Then *he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again* (vv. 36–38). The third time, the weeping is the elders'. The weight has changed hands. What grieved them most was not the wolves and not the chains. It was the face.

→ **Ask:** Paul's exit strategy is the word of His grace, not a man. Why is that enough? Would we have done it that way?

Then: "You yourselves know" opens the address and closes it. What is Paul doing by bracketing everything between two appeals to what they watched him do?

Close with: They grieved most over the face they would not see again, not the doctrine, not the warning. What does that tell you about what three years of tears actually built between these men? And what are we building?

Landing the Study

Do not resolve it into a lesson. The passage does not. Paul prays, and gets on a ship, and the men walk thirty miles home to do the work he handed them.

If you want one sentence to leave in the room, it is the driving question turned around: Paul could say "you yourselves know" because for three years, night and day, with tears, he did not shrink back from anyone, in any venue, on any subject that was profitable. That is the price of being innocent of a man's blood. It is the same price now as it was then.

¶ If the room lands on inadequacy (someone will likely set 2 Corinthians 11:23–28 next to his own life and say that very few live this way), have four texts ready rather than a reassurance. The course Paul finished was "the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus" (v. 24): received, not compared; each man's course is assigned. The man who wrote "I have finished the course" (2 Tim. 4:7) also wrote, mid-course, "Not that I have already obtained it… but I press on" (Phil. 3:12): pressing, not having arrived, was the qualification. His own accounting of the gap: "by the grace of God I am what I am… yet not I, but the grace of God with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). And the crown he expected was "the crown of righteousness… and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8), while a second crown is named specifically for shepherds: "when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet. 5:4, the parallel to v. 28). One crown for the elders in the room; one for every man in it.