

Acts (Part 10) – Like a Wildfire

Lee Lewis – April 27, 2014

[Video]

In Jerusalem, AD 30, Jesus died on the cross, resurrected on the third day, and then ascended into heaven. Fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, the Holy Spirit fell on the apostles, giving them power, purpose, and a plan. Out of joy, the church was born. Empowered by the Spirit, Peter gave his first sermon, and 3,000 hearts were transformed. Hearing, receiving, and repenting, the young church walked in unity and garnered praise. Out of joy, the gospel creates community.

Peter and John then continued to spread the gospel through preaching and miracles, and the church grew by 5,000. In AD 31, Stephen gave a powerful sermon, and the enraged crowd stoned him, making him the first Christian martyr. Around AD 34, on the road to Damascus, the Lord transformed the heart of Saul, a man who persecuted countless Christians, and Saul became Paul. After this conversion, the gospel continued to spread through the ministries of Paul and Peter. God gave Peter a vision and used him to first reach the Gentiles.

In AD 44, King Herod Agrippa the First executed the apostle James and had Peter arrested, but an angel rescued Peter, leading him out of the prison. As the believers were scattered because of persecution, the center of operations for Christianity then turned from Jerusalem to Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas were sent out on their first missionary journey.

In AD 49, an argument arose over whether it was necessary for Gentiles to follow Jewish traditions and customs, particularly circumcision, but the Jerusalem Council sent a letter to the Gentiles affirming that circumcision was not a requirement for salvation. Meanwhile, in their missionary journeys, Paul and Barnabas disagreed over John Mark traveling with them, and they separated. Barnabas and John Mark then sailed to Cyprus, while Timothy joined Paul as they spread the gospel throughout Asia Minor and Greece.

We must keep reminding ourselves of the gospel so that we are careful not to drift toward false gospels. A church consumed with itself will move away from the truth and move toward irrelevance. Salvation comes only through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, not traditions, not customs, not good works. This is the message that must move forward, because the mission doesn't stop. Out of joy, the church multiplies.

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If you've missed the last several months, we've been going through the book of Acts. Matt has been preaching through that, so I'm going to pick up on that today. Matt Younger and Steve Hardin are preaching in Dallas. They're tag-teaming that, which means it'll be like a two-hour sermon. Matt is at the Denton Campus. Flower Mound is not having services tonight, but Zach Lee preached and brought the Word at Flower Mound on Saturday evening and this morning.

I'm a bit pent up, because it has been a while, but it has been a good day to be able to be in the Word together and be face to face with you. We have two unique opportunities tonight that fit so well with this and where the text is going to take us. We're going to be in Acts 18, and we're going to go through chapter 23. I don't know if you've ever taken any preaching classes or you've ever had the opportunity to teach or preach. That's like 10 different sermons, chapter 18 to chapter 23. They put quite the task on all of us this weekend.

But we've also been preaching Acts thematically. We haven't been going verse by verse like we've done with other books, because I think it would take someone like Matt two years to do that. It's a gift he has to be able to get into two verses for fifty minutes. With our time, there are some themes that are very clear in these chapters that I think have significant relevance for the church universal, but specifically for our campus and church here in the Metroplex.

Before I get into that, I want us to be aware and mindful of something that has been talked about here before, but I want to give it a little bit of background so you are in the know if you haven't heard us talk about this at all. One week from today, the Denton Campus covenant members will vote yes or no to roll off as an autonomous church. That's a big deal. There's not a go-to guide on that, because churches that do multisite don't really roll off. We haven't been able to call anybody and say, "Hey, how did you roll off into an autonomous church?"

It's something the Lord has birthed on the hearts of the elders more and more over the last several years. In January, after much prayer and fasting, we brought that before the church and began to teach on why we felt it was biblical and right to pursue this together, trying to be as honest and forthright with the church as possible. "Hey, this is where Denton is. It's our oldest campus. Here's some of their history."

With that being said, let me give you a little bit of history with the Denton Campus. When I was hired at the church in 2006, we were still meeting at the Highland Village Campus. If you've ever been to the Highland Village Campus, it's a lot like this campus. It's kind of tucked into a neighborhood, right in the middle of houses and big trees. It's a labor to get there.

When I started, we were running four services, I think, but it went to six quickly. The sanctuary seated around 700 to 725, somewhere in there. We had service after service, two Saturday night, two Sunday morning, and two Sunday evening. We were exhausted and tapped out. We had done any and everything we could do to try to deal with the numbers. Some of the things worked; most of the things didn't.

The Lord used that season to really bring us to our knees. If there's one thing I've seen the Lord consistently do at our church, he has brought us to our knees where all of our logic has failed us. In that posture, we've been able to put our hands out and say, "Lord, you do it; we can't." Isn't that the posture of prayer, though?

The posture of prayer is us coming to the Father and saying, "I can't; you can. Would you show me? Would you guide me? Would you lead me?" Which is why it's such a great place for the body of Christ to live and to dwell: in that posture of, "I don't have all the answers. My logic will and has failed me. I need the Lord to intervene here. I need the Lord to move here."

This was one of those seasons we did not know what to do. We were begging the Lord. It was a time of prayer and fasting. I think we started during January, and then we went for several months. We would gather together every Wednesday evening. It was called Venture. We prayed and fasted. People gave up food. People gave up different things and fasted from those things.

We got after the Lord together and just asked the Lord, "What do we do? We're turning hundreds of cars and people away every weekend. What do we do? We have Home Groups all over the

Metroplex." People were driving from like Corsicana, I think. I'm like, "Man, there has to be a church in Corsicana you can go to." It was such a saturation we didn't know what to do.

After that period ended, a pastor from Denton named Lan Leavell, who was the pastor at Grace Temple Baptist, which is right across the street from UNT, approached our elders and said, "Hey, we're dying. We're not going to make it, and it's just a matter of time before UNT absorbs us and levels this church and turns it into a parking lot. We want to deed you the building." We had like 1,400 people driving from Denton. That's immediately going to create some space at the church. The Lord gives us a \$7 million facility.

Beau Hughes begins to pastor there as the campus pastor. Over the last seven-plus years, Beau, with the other ministers and pastors there, has raised up elders and deacons on that campus. Beau and his staff are personally responsible for our covenant renewal process we do every year for member care, the way we've modeled member care and built out member care, our covenant membership, the way that has been molded and crafted. On so many levels, Beau and the staff at the Denton Campus have been responsible for building these things up and shoring them up.

So as conversations have gone on the last several years and as the Denton Campus has grown in diversity... It's the most diverse campus we have, both racially and socioeconomically. The way the Lord has used them in the community of Denton, it has made a mark. It has been noticed. We brought that before the church. They're voting on that a week from today. Like I said, it's a big deal, and it fits right into what we're going to be talking about here today.

I want us to pray for them. I want us to gather up in twos and threes, and I want us to pray. We've *been* praying for them. If you've been to any of the elder-led prayers this year, if you came to the Town Hall... You've heard Matt talk about it more and more as he has preached through Acts. We've been lifting them up, but we have an opportunity again to lift up our brothers and sisters in Denton.

Some of you know people there. Some of you went to school there. Some of you were at that campus for a while. Some of you don't know anyone there, and you're like, "Why would it matter to me?" This should matter to all of us. Just because you don't know anyone doesn't mean you can't intercede for our brothers and sisters up there with the big decision they have before them as they vote next week.

Here's what I want us to do. I want us to huddle up. If you came by yourself, you're welcome to pray by yourself, but huddle up in twos, threes, with whomever you came with, and just pray for the Denton Campus. I was texting with Beau this weekend. He gave me some specific prayer requests I'll read over you as you're praying so you can pray accordingly. You can pray as the Spirit leads, or you can pray for some of the things I put before you. So y'all huddle up and pray, and I'll read these over you.

Pray for unity and love. The Lord has been so gracious to create a culture of unity and to guard against divisiveness there, so pray for more of that and more love to abound there. Pray that they would trust in God's leading in this and through this. In some ways it's uncharted waters, so pray that they would trust the Lord above all as they follow him. Then pray against fear and preference, that the Lord would keep their hands open to his will and what he's doing and how he's raising them up for the works they have done and that they're going to continue to do.

Lord, we thank you for our friends and brothers and sisters at the Denton Campus. I thank you for how you provided that facility out of nowhere. No back-door meetings where it was kind of stirred up and planted in somebody's mind, but literally, you allowed for the Grace Temple Baptist members and those who were living in and around the Denton area from The Village to come together and build this beautiful, beautiful picture of your church.

I thank you for other leaders. I thank you, Lord, for the good friends I have there. This is a big loss for us potentially, but it's a gain for your kingdom. We thank you, Lord, that you don't need The Village to advance your kingdom. You do that regardless. So I pray you would raise more men and women up at the Denton Campus to oversee and to lead and to teach and to disciple and to evangelize and to minister to that entire community.

I thank you for the way they've poured into The Village Church and how they've used their gifts and talents to sharpen us all. I pray that this week you would stir in them and speak clearly to them what you're wanting to do moving forward in and through the congregation. We bless your name. We thank you for the opportunity to even have conversations like this and ask you to move in such a way. You're a good God.

Be with them even now as Matt preaches. I pray they would hear the Word taught and they would be encouraged by your Word and enriched by your Word and that you'd continue to bless everything they do for your kingdom and for your glory. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

Thank you all for doing that. All right, Acts 18:24. This is a great section in Acts. In fact, several of the stories, some of which we're going to cover at length and some of which I'm going to have to fly over and just give you some highlights, are my favorite stories in the book of Acts. You have the sons of Sceva in here. You have the riot in Ephesus. You have Paul in Ephesus. Apollos is in there, and Aquila and Priscilla.

It's rich and full with treasures of stories from the early church. There are four themes I've picked up on consistently as I studied this, and I want to put those themes before us, and I want us to consider under the Word of the Lord what this means for us and how we should respond in light of these things. I'm going to start in verse 24. Just read along with me.

"Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John."

There's a ton of debate about, as Apollos is delivering... Apollos is a beast of a speaker. I mean, this guy could hold the room. He was competent with his language. He could parse the Word. But he was baptized under John the Baptist's ministry. The ministry of John the Baptist was paving the way for the One to come. Who was the One who came? The Messiah, Christ.

John the Baptist paves the way for Christ, and John himself preached a message of repentance to the Lord in preparation for the One who's coming. Apollos is baptized under his ministry, and he's ferociously preaching. It's drawing attention. The Spirit is with him. There's tons of debate on whether he was a believer regenerate or not. I don't think it really matters, because he gets regenerated here in a second for sure.

Either way, he has a gift. The Spirit is on him. He just doesn't understand all of the components of the gospel of Jesus Christ and what that means in conjunction with what he had already been taught. What's important to understand about this is this isn't a guy who's a heretic who would stand before you and say, "Hey guys, I'm God." That would make me a heretic. By the way, if I say that, leave and run. Find another church.

This is not what Apollos is doing. He just doesn't know; he hasn't been fully instructed, so there's a bit of ignorance there. There is a bit of a not knowing there. You see what happens from here. He is eloquent in speech. The Spirit is with him. He spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus. Then verse 26: **"He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately."**

This is a beautiful picture. You can't just read over this and be like, "Oh, Priscilla and Aquila took him aside." There's a sweetness and tenderness with this brother. Aquila and Priscilla take him aside. They recognize the Spirit is on him. They recognize his understanding and his knowledge, but then they explain the full counsel of God to him. They explain what the true gospel is.

We've already seen this happening in Acts. It happens all the more in chapters 18-23, where a pure and clear gospel is getting brought before the people, and as that clear and pure gospel is being brought before the people, you watch the church spread like wildfire. False doctrines are getting pushed to the fringes. Foolish teachings are getting exposed for what they are. There's a clear and pure gospel that's being displayed over and over.

They take this brother aside and say, "This is the gospel." He responds accordingly. **"And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him."** There's another huge thing going on here that you can't just read over. The church is blossoming and thriving in such a way where all Aquila and Priscilla have to do is write a letter and send it so the disciples there would be ready for Apollos as he came.

By *ready*, it wasn't like, "Let's have our arguments ready to blow this dummy out of the water." They received him in, and they blessed him and loved him. The community of faith, the community of saints, like no other in the world, should be a place that openly embraces both the people of God and those who are hurting and those who don't know.

It should be a place where those who are left out, those who *do* live on an island, those who *are* outcast, see that and desire that and want that, even if they look for it in a hundred different places, and as the Spirit does a regenerating work in their hearts, they realize that longing was put there by God to begin with, because God has created them for that community.

You're going to hear me rail on this today. The danger in the American church is it's such an individual thing. "I'm going to do this by myself. I'll let people in when it's convenient." That's not what's going on here. As they find out about Apollos... They don't know him from anyone. In fact, they know he has been teaching something that's right but not fully right. They receive this brother in, and they love him. They encourage him and bless him.

"When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus."

Something has changed there. Whether he was a believer or not at this time, he's a believer now. He begins to proclaim this true and pure gospel to all of those who would hear.

Then in chapter 19, verse 1: **"And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' And they said, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' And he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They said, 'Into John's baptism.'" They're referencing John the Baptist again.**

"And Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all."

You see instantaneous regeneration. The Spirit comes upon them, and they begin to speak in tongues, and they begin to prophesy. It gets even crazier, in a good way crazy, after this. Paul's handkerchief is jacked from him. Someone has taken it, because he's doing such profound ministry, they're like... It's kind of like the woman who thought, "If I could just touch Jesus and be healed" type thing. Like, "If I could just get his shoelace or something, just get his handkerchief."

They jack his handkerchief, take it to houses where the lame and crippled and dying are, and then his handkerchief heals people. I mean, have you ever heard of such a thing? That blows ol' Harry Potter with those goofy glasses out of the water. That blows away anything I've ever heard in my life. I'm like, "Come on. A handkerchief? Let me study the Greek word. Is it really a handkerchief?" His garment was taken and used to heal others because of the power he's walking in at this time.

You're going to see this build with Paul. Paul is in this Greco-Roman area. It's his last missionary trip there. He might know this at this time. Most likely he doesn't fully understand it, though, if he knows at all. He's just being sensitive to the Spirit, and he's going and doing what the Lord is calling him to do in and amongst these towns and these communities and in these different cultures. He's trying to be faithful as he does these things.

When he comes to Ephesus, he ends up spending two years there. Some places he goes for a couple of weeks, some places for a couple of months. He goes to Ephesus for two years to build up the men and women there, to raise up elders there, to raise up deacons, to help them establish a health within the church, so that when he leaves they can continue to oversee, watch the flock, and advance the gospel accordingly, as Christ has called the church to do, to be light and salt to a lost and dying world. That's the work he's doing at this moment.

It talks about the power of his ministry, and I wish I could get into this. In verse 11, it gets right into the sons of Sceva. This is one of my favorite stories maybe in the whole New Testament but for sure in Acts. Let me just read a couple of things. During this time, the sons of Sceva... They're itinerant Jewish exorcists. I don't really know what that is. If you ever send me your résumé and that's on it, I'm just throwing it right in the trash.

I have no idea what that is, other than that there was definitely some mysticism involved with it. They're doing exorcisms, and they're not doing it in such a way where they have any true authority with them. They try to invoke Jesus' name. These guys are pretty sharp. Consider this for a second. They've seen the moving, the comings, the goings, of how the gospel has been transforming these people. They've taken note of it.

"Man, this 'name of Jesus' stuff is pretty incredible. Did you see what Paul did? Did you see what his disciples did? Did you see how Apollos converted and how he preaches? Do you see the movement taking place in these people's lives? Well, it's not enough to convince me, but maybe I can use it. Maybe I can leverage it." Here's what happens. This is where you see syncretism begin to creep in.

Do you know what syncretism is? Syncretism is "Take a little of this, take a little of this, take a little of this, and try to mix it all together. As long as it's palatable to me, by the way. It has to be palatable to me. I like what Islam offers here. I think I'm going to take this from Islam. I really love what's offered here with New Age, plus those crystals are so pretty.

I'm going to take a little bit of this here. I love the meditation offered here in Eastern mysticism. And Jesus, he was a great teacher. He's in history books. I think I'll take a little bit about what Jesus was. He just loved everybody. I'm going to kind of pull it together, and that's what I'm going to do." These guys are sharp. They've seen the power of the gospel advance and change lives radically, and they say, "Well, let's just tack on Jesus to what we do. Let's tack on the name of Jesus."

So these sons of Sceva tack on the name of Jesus and try to do this exorcism, and it makes the demon furious. The demon literally says to them, "I know Jesus. I've heard of Paul. Who are you?" I could be stronger there with what he told them. Then he beats them naked. They weren't naked when they got beaten. They were wearing clothes at some point and got beaten out of their clothes. Those are two different things. I mean, they were in clothes going into getting beat up, and they were beaten naked and ran off. They got handled and rebuked big time.

I want us to be careful here, because this isn't just a story that has no relevance for us today. You don't think there are multiple competing voices that would tell you, "Oh, take a little bit of this, take a little bit of this"? You don't think in your flesh you look for things that are palatable that you want to submit to? Which, by the way, isn't submission at all, because you agree with it from the get-go.

You tack those things onto your life, and the moment you do that, you muddy the gospel, you pollute the truth, and you begin to veer away from this blemish-less, pure gospel that's being proclaimed faithfully here. Church, listen to me on this. This happens all the time in churches. Some of the biggest and most popular churches in the world have veered away from this and tacked onto the message of the gospel and made it an imperfect message. They've muddied it.

The moment that happens, there's a drift that occurs. Lives are not transformed by anything except Christ and Christ alone. Through Christ and Christ alone our hope is found. He is the One who shores us and secures us and ransoms us. When you add to that, you change it altogether. This happens all the time in our culture even now. So be on guard.

He exhorts them later, before he heads off to Jerusalem, to guard themselves against wolves. "Guard yourselves even amongst some among you who will begin to preach a different message. Guard yourselves." It's so subtle. A mentor of mine, a dear friend, always explained drift like this. One of his friends was a big-time pilot and flew those big Boeings that go really fast. He would constantly do the East- to West-Coast flight, from LA to New York. That was his route. That's what he ran.

He said if you get one degree off from the start and you're headed, say, from LA to New York, by the end of the trip, you're several hundred miles away from where you need to be. Being one degree off. Do you see how important it is to stay focused and to stay on what is truth and stay submitted to what is truth? It's so subtle that we would drift in such a way where we're hundreds of miles away from where we wanted to be to begin with.

What's really dangerous is by the time we realize we're hundreds of miles away, chances are we're so deceived in our own hearts and so arrogant with our self-entitlement that we don't care anymore. We know we're off, we know we've drifted, but we don't care, because our hearts have begun to harden. I'm pleading with you on this to guard yourself and to be aware of the competing voices that do take place.

I'm going to move on to the riot in Ephesus in verse 21. This is a great story; again, one of my favorites. It talks about Artemis. Artemis was a goddess they worshiped in this whole region, and there was much money to be made in and around the sale of goods concerning Artemis. Demetrius is a pagan. This dude is sharp. He's a silversmith, and he literally makes his living... It's like he has a monopoly. He's making a killing making these silver idols and selling them to the people, silver idols of Artemis for the worship of the goddess.

Again, look at the theme here. He sees the transformation that's taking place. This guy is smart enough to see, "Man, John has changed a lot. Ever since that Jesus thing got into him, he's a different dude. Huh." He has seen lives transformed. He has seen cultures transformed by the faithful proclamation of the gospel. He sees this, recognizes the threat to his livelihood, and says, "This is bad for business. This is going to shut my business down if this keeps up."

So on the side, he begins to conjure up dissension among those in Ephesus. They start to boil, and a riot ensues. They grab Paul, grab some of his followers, beat them up, and drag them before the council, and the council is like, "You're going to get us in trouble with Rome. Shut your mouths. They're going to charge us with a riot. Clear the streets. Get done. We'll deal with this on our own."

That's the scene that happens here. Again, you see this unbelievable theme, where there's this honest community where the people of God are coming together. They're doing life together. They're proclaiming the gospel faithfully together. Their lives have been and are being transformed, and they're going out and pushing back darkness, and people are taking notice. People see it.

As I studied this, I was unbelievably convicted with my own life. It made me think, "I wonder if my neighbors think I live differently." I don't see them very often, but when I see them out in the front yard and I go talk to them, or we're walking with our kids, I wonder if they think, "There's something a bit different about that guy." I don't know if they do, but I found this to be extremely convicting

As the saints, what has been purchased for you is life and freedom right now, and then there's the life to come. Are you kidding me? What a trade-off that is, to live your life in such a way now where you recognize and realize the life and freedom you have through Christ. It frees you up to be bold, to love and to pursue the hurting and the broken and the unlovable. Are there any of those in your life? I know I have a few, and I know sometimes I go the other way when I see them, to my shame.

What an opportunity to be freed up because of what has been extended to me through Christ, to engage accordingly and to share the hope of Christ, to love with the hope of Christ. This is a plea from me to you. Oh, might we be a people who love and pursue this way. Oh, might we be a people who are so overwhelmed by the goodness of the gospel that that message never gets old.

If there was one message we preached here every week, which we pretty much do anyway, and it was Christ, the gospel of Jesus Christ, wouldn't that be enough? Because the gospel not only saves, it sanctifies. Might we be a people who never grow old and weary of that message, and might that spur us on to do bold things for his kingdom, not because he needs us to, but because he calls us into it.

Then he shifts. This is where I think Paul really begins to understand what's happening. What's amazing about Paul in this whole journey is he walks so in tune with the Holy Spirit. He walks so closely with the Lord. He knows where to go, when to go, how to go, where *not* to go, *when* not to go, what to say, what *not* to say, because he's just in tune with the Spirit.

One of the frustrating things for me is I'll have those seasons where, not that he sits on your shoulder, but it's like he's sitting on my shoulder. I can just hear him. He's just very clear. I hear him leading and guiding me. Then there are these other seasons that are far more frustrating and seem to be far longer at times. Do you ever tune the radio station and get to a station where there's no station and there's just static? It's like there's this constant static, and I can't make out anything. I can't make heads or tails of anything.

Paul is not that brother. Paul is walking in such a way where he clearly hears the Lord. You really see a compelling evidence for that here. When he's coming to a place where he knows he's getting ready to go to Jerusalem... By the way, we're not getting into Jerusalem. That's for Matt to do next time he's up on this. He's headed to Jerusalem. He knows the Lord is leading him there. Let me tell you, he did not have many, if any, friends in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is like the teeth.

So picture this. Paul was Saul. Saul was the Jew of Jews, meaning you couldn't out-righteous him according to the law. He was making a killing off of persecuting the believers from the early church. Then he's on the road to Damascus. Jesus himself visits him and blinds him, and he's converted radically. Are there any of those stories in this room? (Not the Damascus thing. Find me afterwards if you did. That's incredible.)

Are there any of those radical stories, where one day you saw this way, the Lord intervenes and blows you up, and the next day you saw this way? This is Paul. Saul turns to Paul, and Paul begins this unbelievable advance of the church and the kingdom of God, accordingly. To another Jew, that would make him a sellout, and that's a nice way to put it. So no friends with the Jews...check. The Romans are pretty nervous about his ministry, just like they were with Jesus, and you saw what happened there. So Romans...check.

He's compelled by the Spirit to go back to that place. He's in Ephesus. These people love him there. They love Paul there. They take care of him. As he ministers and pours himself out for them, they bless him and help him and encourage him. They love him. He has it made in Ephesus. The bro grows it big in Ephesus. But he feels the Lord calling him, and he's headed back. So you see this building. You see what's coming and what's being birthed inside of Paul, and he can't not go. Chapter 20, 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..." He has technically already left Ephesus on a boat and sends word to the Ephesian elders to meet him in a location when he's en route. They heed his word and meet him in this location while he's en route, and this is what he begins to tell them. There are some other exhortations in there, but he starts with this, and there's this beautiful farewell that takes place. This is what Paul brings before the elders in Ephesus.

"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; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house..."

I love that he does it this way. We've gathered together all day. I love corporate gatherings. I love when the body of Christ gets to come together and corporately cry out, corporately hear the Word taught together, and corporately worship together. It is not a small thing. It's a massive thing the Lord has given us here.

But he's not only doing that. He's going house to house. He hasn't forsaken that either. There are these groups of people. We call them Home Groups here. You can call them "life groups." That's why I pushed it so hard in the morning services, because we had Group Connect today; knowing there are people who are dying on a vine who are extremely isolated, and that's contrary to the way God has wired and designed the believer to be.

He's going house to house and gathering with these believers, and they're preaching the gospel. They're exhorting one another. They're encouraging one another. It's this beautiful picture of how the church is supposed to be. Then as he gets into it, he keeps going, and he says, "**...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...**"

This isn't *constrained* in the sense of being held back, like he's being disobedient to God. That's not what this word *constrained* means. It's being overly propelled by the Spirit, like propelled and then some. God is kind of just punching him along. "Go, go. I'm with you. Go." He is sending him on. It's obvious to Paul, and it's obvious to everyone around that this is what the Lord is doing. He's so constrained and propelled to go by the Holy Spirit.

Then he keeps going. "**...except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.**" Did you hear what he just said? He knows where he's headed and where he's headed again and where he has been before and what it has led to. It has led to suffering. It has led to imprisonment. It has led to him getting beaten.

Not to mention he had a thorn in his side, placed there by a messenger of Satan who had permission from God to do so. It's in 2 Corinthians 12. The thorn was placed in his side. Most think it was a physical ailment that pressed him and perplexed him. We're talking Paul, whose handkerchief healed people. I would imagine he had a red phone to God, and that when Paul asked, God said, "You

have the faith, bro." *Bam!* God said, "No" every time. "No. My power is made perfect in your weakness. I'm going to keep you bent low here."

Who does that? Who does that except one compelled by the Spirit? Who does that except one who knows what the Lord is calling them to do? This is what's so inspiring and encouraging to me about the Denton Campus. I have pastored at churches before, and there is an amazing grace to pastor here at The Village, because our staff is taken care of. I don't live in fear. You can actually be open and honest about your struggles with the elders. There's this beautiful grace but also a very clear gospel articulated. Just to be under that... I've blossomed. The Lord has used it in such mighty ways.

To think of leaving that... My first thought is, "Why would I want to do that?" That's like leaving high school to go to college. It's exciting for a while until you go and you're homesick. Have you ever been homesick? That's the tension there. We feel this is right before the Lord. We see the Lord doing something unique and special in Denton. We see the man has been raised up, the leadership and oversight has been raised up.

These are uncharted waters, and it's going to be scary, and it's going to be bumpy at times. Oh, and by the way, you're leaving that which you've known for so long. There's no way of knowing how it's going to turn out. There's no way of knowing how it's going to look. You simply have to trust the Lord. It's a beautiful, self-abandoning, "I trust you and you alone, Lord" move toward him and his will and his purposes.

Again, my plea with you here is might we be a people who trust the Lord that way, that we don't look at the scenario and consider what might or might not happen and then make a decision. We hear the Lord, we trust the Lord, we follow the Lord, and regardless of what *could* happen, we go where the Lord has called us to go. Now there's this thing called wisdom. That's why it's good to walk in community, because they can tell you when you're being dumb.

Y'all are dumb too. Y'all can laugh on that one. I'm not just going to throw myself under the bus on that one. You do dumb stuff at times, and when other eyes are on you and they point those things out, sometimes it avoids a car crash altogether, does it not? So there's this thing called wisdom in that, but even the Spirit leads wisdom. Wisdom that's wisdom from God is found in the Scriptures, his Word. We're supposed to submit to the whole counsel of God to begin with.

So to be able to walk in such a way where we throw off those things that would hinder us and walk in faith, in trust of God, to where he's calling us, proclaiming the excellencies of Christ in a pure way, engaging with other believers around us. This church was not perfect, but you're getting an unbelievable picture of how the Lord has wired the body of Christ to be, and it's amazing. It's worth fighting for as a people of God. It's worth fighting, clawing, and scratching to get there. It's going to take hard work, which he's about to talk about.

"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... 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 the kingdom will see my face again."

You want to talk about a gut punch? He just delivered an unbelievable gut punch to these people. Not because he didn't love them. He in a lot of ways has mentored them. He has raised them up. He says, "You're most likely not going to see my face again." Again, I'll bring up the homesick reference. When I was in college, I think that's where I felt the most homesick. First days of school were always hard for me. It was exciting and exhilarating, but then it also felt a little nauseating to me.

College was when I really noticed it. I'd go home for Thanksgiving break or Christmas break. It's my home. I'm in my bed again. I'm seeing my friends and getting to be with my family. Then I would drive back to my dorm room or back to my apartment, and on my way back I would begin to get this pit in my stomach and begin to feel depressed and, really, that next week or so would just kind of sit in a gray cloud.

Then it would lift, and I would return to normal, nearly as if I forgot I was sad from being gone and then coming back. That's this feeling that's beginning to set in with these people. They're feeling the angst and anxiety and fear begin to set in as Paul shares with them, "You will probably not see me 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."

This is another theme. It's clearly articulated here, but it's highlighted throughout chapters 18-23. Submitting to the whole counsel of God. This guards against syncretism. This keeps the pure gospel message pure. It doesn't add to it. It puts us as people in a hemmed-in guardrail. Here's what our culture would tell you: "Who is so-and-so to tell you what to do? What kind of God would hem you in? Make your own decisions. You're autonomous. No one has authority over you. You have your own authority."

The reality is everybody has a boss. There's no perfectly autonomous person in the world. Maybe some Egyptian prince somewhere who answers to nobody and kills a lot of people, but he's going to answer to God one day. Everybody is called to submit on some level. It's how humanity is set up. It's how God has wired it. When God has put his counsel, the full counsel of God... He has put a guardrail around his children, those he loves.

This is not a punishment in any way. This is a beautiful thing. I don't know about you, but my heart is deceitful. My heart is wickedly deceitful at times, and I will walk over a cliff over and over again. The very fact he has given me a guardrail and hemmed me in means he loves me. Why wouldn't I submit to the whole counsel of God? Why would I pick and choose what I will and won't submit to? That's not submission.

When God has put his counsel before us, he has called us to put ourselves gladly under it. Sometimes it's hard, sometimes we don't agree with it, but it's for our good. As the Spirit moves and massages those hard areas out, our hearts long to embrace that. That's where sanctification happens. That's where Christian maturity happens. That's where we avoid walking off a cliff that we don't know the edges. He's telling them to submit themselves to the full counsel of God, because he has been faithful to preach the whole counsel of God. Then in 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 away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one 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 were 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.'"

This is the other one: work hard. This one worries me the most for us. By *us* I mean the American church. I think the American church is so self-absorbed and approaches church as, "What can I get out of this?" The ability to work hard and empty themselves out is a foreign idea, because people go to church to get what they can get.

These brothers and sisters are emptying themselves out over and over again, because they know, "We're aliens here, strangers in a foreign land. This is not our home. The Lord is calling us to glory." While we're here, we're going to be wrung out for the sake of the gospel. It *will* be difficult at times. There *will* be those people we just want to throw our hands up on. There *will* be those situations that we find ourselves scratching our heads because we don't know what to do.

But through all of it, through the power of the Spirit, through the strength of the Lord, he will guide us through that as we work hard to advance his kingdom. Not because he needs us, not because he needs The Village Church, not because God needs the Fort Worth Campus or he can't push back darkness out here, but because he has called us into the work he's doing. Praise his name.

I want to be in on that. I want to be involved in that. I want to be wrung out. That's why I said what I said in the beginning. I am good tired today, exhaustedly good tired. (That's a terrible sentence; I realize that.) I've just been wrung out today by the Lord, just pressed on. I never sleep well the night before I preach. I wake up at like 3:00 going over my outline. I'm like, "Shut up. Just go to sleep." Just wrung out. I want to be wrung out.

I want to be a man who's openhanded with the things of the Lord and with the ways of the Lord and what he's calling me to do. I want to be so sensitive to his leading and walk so well with the brothers and sisters he has put around me that those things sharpen me and point me towards the Lord and grow me in maturity in him, as we proclaim the gospel together and we lock arms and watch the Lord push back darkness.

Wouldn't it be great...? I have such hopes for this. Two years ago when I moved out here, I didn't really like coming out to this property, because it was overgrown and it was trashed. There was

always paraphernalia (that's putting it nicely) in the parking lot, because it was a ghost town. People came and did sinful things here or dumped their old couches in the parking lot or whatever other trash they had in the back of their truck.

As the Lord has brought more and more life here, as light has been shone into the darkness here, this place has begun to transform, where it's becoming more and more of a community center point for this neighborhood. The gospel has the potential to do such a work that it physically changes an area, that it physically assaults a culture, and people take notice of it.

This is real. This is what was happening here. This is why Demetrius was so worried about the gospel. It was going to affect his livelihood, because he saw it changing everybody. This is true. This is right. The Lord does these things. Who wants to be a part of that? I don't want to miss that. Then he closes with this. This is the farewell. Verse 36:

"And when he had 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."

Most of the time, when I have the opportunity to try to take a point from Scripture and use an illustration to bring maybe some common ground between us and what the text is saying, I'll tell a story about myself or I'll tell a story I've heard or use an example I've seen or been around, but I have the privilege and opportunity tonight to bring a family up here that we're commissioning before they head off overseas to do mission work.

The way this has worked out has been unbelievable, because we have been planning this for several months, and, according to the Lord, it happened to line up on this Sunday when we talk about gospel goodbyes. This one is going to sting. This is a good family. I love them dearly. It's going to be a big loss. Let me let you into how I think, and not in a good way sometimes.

I see the scenario, and I immediately begin to scheme, like, "Who's going to fill that hole?" or "Who's going to step up here?" The Lord is going to do it. He always does. The Lord raising them up to send out the Hall family is one of those exciting things, but it grips my heart a bit. I met them two years ago, and we went to Spring Creek Barbeque in Arlington and just got to know them. They were entering the sending program.

Immediately, they shared their testimony with me, and it's an incredible testimony of grace. They didn't love Jesus at the time. The Lord went and found them and saved them in an unbelievable way, and then just burdened their hearts for the lost. For years now, they've raised their family in the ways of the Lord, setting a different trajectory for their family altogether.

They share this story with me, and I'm just selfish. I go, "Oh, I have big plans for these people. I have big plans for this family." Then they told me the plans God has for them to go overseas. I was like, "Dang, God! You got them first." Watching the Lord prepare them and raise them up has been such an encouragement. I wanted them to come up, and we're going to get around them and pray for them.

I meant what I said. I can see why they were so emotional over this deal. They loved Paul. They loved him dearly. You can see the hurt. It's not a bad hurt. The Ephesians aren't mad at Paul because he's leaving. They're just sad. They're sad, but they know the Lord is calling him to go do a great work elsewhere.

This is similar for me and similar for many of you, because many of you know them personally. They're going to a place I can't even tell you about because it's that dangerous and that closed. If this tells you anything; people don't vacation there. They get to learn two of the hardest languages in the world. It's going to be very trying. It's going to be very difficult. It's an unreached people. It's a people who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Lord has so burdened their hearts and so provided for them that they can't not go. I'm going to miss them. Love you guys so much. It'll be awesome to get those updates. It'll be awesome to touch base. It'll be awesome to send teams over to do the work of ministry with y'all, but it won't be the same. That's okay. Where we're unable to open our hands, sometimes the Lord just breaks our fingers open anyway. So I want us to be openhanded with what the Lord does and what he brings and the resources he has for us here.

So y'all gather around, if you know them especially. We're going to lay hands on the Halls. While you're praying out loud... If you don't come up, just stand up and reach out towards them. We're just going to get around them, love on them, lay our hands on them, and pray out loud. I'm going to read some prayer requests Jeremy specifically gave for me while y'all are praying, and you can add those to your prayers. So let's pray.

They've asked for prayer to see and hear what God is doing and such a sensitivity to follow him there, for a boldness to proclaim boldly the pure gospel message of Jesus Christ. Also to be obedient to the Holy Spirit's leading, very much similar to what we talked about with Paul, his sensitivity to the Spirit to go and to stay and to say certain things and not say other things. Just a sensitivity there.

Pray for language favor with both of those languages. They're extremely difficult. Then pray for Jeremy as he shepherds his family as they have sold everything and uprooted to go to a foreign land. Pray for strength for him as he shepherds his family.

Lord, thank you for the Halls. I thank you for their faithfulness. I thank you for their salvation, how you pulled them from darkness when they weren't even looking for you and you set their feet upon a rock. I thank you, Lord, that what they're going to do is not something they don't already do here, that they proclaim your goodness; they proclaim your gospel to all they come in contact with.

So Lord, bless them. Thank you for how you've provided for them financially. I pray for their teammates, that you would bless them as well. O Lord, help them with the language. I pray you'd give them the ability to speak it in such a way that they have no business being able to do because you miraculously impart that on them. Give them favor with the people, and do a mighty work through them.

I pray that they would feel loved from their friends and family back home, but I pray most of all they would sense your deep presence and sense your leading and sense your Spirit. We love them, but, God, we entrust them to you, because you love them more. Thank you again for their faithfulness. I pray that we'd be able from afar to pray for and intercede for our brother and sister and their family. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.