



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 20:13–24

“The Integrity of Paul’s Ministry: Part I”

TRANSCRIPT

Our Scripture reading for today begins in Acts chapter 20 in verse 13 and we’re going to read the remainder of the chapter, although, we will devote at least two, possibly, three Sundays to Paul’s sermon that he gave to the elders of the church of Ephesus at Miletus. Now, remember that the apostle is on his third missionary journey and as he did in his second missionary journey, he will seek to conclude it in Jerusalem. He’s very anxious now because of the delay and his inability to be in Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover, to at least make the feast of Pentecost, about seven weeks or so later. So now, we are going to read how he went down the coast of Asia Minor, on the West, and then desires that at least talking to the elders of the church at Ephesus. He gave them this address. Acts chapter 20 in verse 13, they are leaving from Troas, where Eutychus made a name for himself forever, by falling asleep in church. I’m sorry, but that opportunity is lost forever for the rest of you. Of course, I know that you will take advantage of the opportunity from time to time, but Eutychus has managed to get his name in the Bible, for falling asleep in church, a very ordinary achievement, but if you are the first, it makes a difference, Acts chapter 20 in verse 13.

“And we went before to ship, and sailed unto Assos, there intending to take in Paul: For so had he appointed, minding himself to go afoot.”

Now, nothing is said, incidentally, about why Paul wanted to go that twenty miles or so on foot. But, nevertheless, he did; Luke doesn’t tell us why.

“And when he met with us at Assos, we took him in, and came to Mitylene. And we sailed thence, and came the next day over against Chios; and the next day we arrived at Samos, and tarried at Trogyllium, [that’s the Authorized Version has that clause some other texts do not.] and the next day we came to Miletus. For Paul had determined to sail by Ephesus because he would not spend the time in Asia: For he hasted, if it were possible for him, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost. And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church.”

Evidently, the ship on which he was traveling was a commercial ship and so they would unload at set harbors and then take on goods. And that would take two or three days, as is the custom even today. So thinking that here is an opportunity to get to speak to the elders of the church at Ephesus, at least, he sent for them, about thirty miles away, and had them come down to talk to him. I would presume that the reason he didn’t want to go to Ephesus was because the last time he was there, remember, there was a riot. And then, secondly, if he went there, he might feel that he had to stay a lengthy period of time, and he wanted to be in Jerusalem on the feast of Pentecost. Verse 18:

“And when they were come to him, he said unto them, ‘Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto

Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me.”

Now, Paul had been told when he was called that the Lord would show him how many things he must suffer for him. So the apostle is expecting that wherever he goes, he will find bonds and afflictions, and he was not disappointed.

“But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. Wherefore I take you to record this day that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.”

One can see that the apostle’s doctrine of man is not the common doctrine that we so often hear today in the United States of America and, actually, all over the West; that man is essentially good. Even in the church, the apostle expected that there would be individuals who would rise up and out of a desire, a selfish kind of desire, would speak perverse things to draw away disciples after them.

“Therefore, he says in the 31st verse, watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them

which are sanctified. I have coveted no man’s silver, or gold, or apparel. Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me. I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

That, incidentally, is not found in the gospels. It is one of the *logia*; that is, the things said by our Lord but not recorded by the gospel writers, testifying, of course, to the fact that there were sayings of our Lord which were circulated at this time, that the writers of the gospels did not include in their gospel accounts. Luke tells us that when he composed his gospel, he had access to the writings of many who had attempted to write a gospel. But he wanted to write one that would be more accurate; and, this is testimony to the fact that there were things that our Lord said that did not come to be in our gospels. That should not surprise us; but sometimes it does surprise people who haven’t thought about what might have been said by the Lord, and yet not thought to be suitable for the gospels by the Holy Spirit.

“And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all. And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck, and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more. And they accompanied him unto the ship.”

May God bless this reading of his Word. We bow together, now, for a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the privilege that is ours; we are grateful, indeed, for this tender, compassionate message that the apostle delivered to the elders of the church at Ephesus. And we pray, Lord, that as we read it and as we study it and ponder it, that we may take this as a message to us, to our elders, and to the conduct of the Christian church. We pray, Lord, that we may be responsive to the things that the apostle has set forth, and that we may not, ourselves, following the

principle that he has set down, hold back anything that is profitable to men and women about us. We thank Thee for the boldness of Paul and we pray, O God, give us courage to boldly preach the gospel of Christ. We so need it, Lord. We confess so often we are cowards in the proclamation of the truth. O God, deliver us. Make us bold witnesses and useful witnesses of the grace of God in Christ.

We give Thee thanks for this day. We thank Thee for the whole church of Jesus Christ and for the privilege of serving Thee in our age. We pray that all of the needs of the church of Christ may truly be met, and that the whole body may continue to grow and to, ultimately, reach the perfect man, the mature man, as Paul has pointed out. And when our Lord comes, we look forward to that day, Lord, and pray that we may enter His presence as a mature and perfected body. In the meantime, we pray, Lord, Thy blessing upon the ministry that is carried on in the Church of Jesus Christ. May it be fruitful and profitable. We pray for our country, we pray, particularly, for our president at this time. Minister to him. And we pray also, Lord, that Thou wilt give healing in accordance with Thy will.

We thank Thee for Believers Chapel, and its elders and its deacons, we pray for its elders that the message that Paul gave to the Ephesian elders may particularly come home to them, as they minister among us as our overseers and bishops. We pray for the sick. We ask, especially, Lord for those who are suffering, some who are bereaving, and others who have special needs; we commit them to Thee. We thank Thee, Lord, for the promises of the Word of God and we recognize that these promises are guaranteed by the faithfulness of our Triune God in Heaven. We look to Thee, Lord, to glorify Thyself in the fulfillment of Thy promises. And now we ask Thy blessing upon this meeting and other meetings of this day.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] We’re making a slight change in the title for the message this morning. Instead of “The Integrity of Paul’s Ministry or Paul’s Ministry and Integrity,” or whatever it was, I’ve forgotten now. But the subject is, “The Integrity of Paul’s Ministry,” and since we’re going to devote more than

one Sunday to this magnificent address that he gave to the Ephesian elders, I think, that that will be our general title. When we think of integrity, what do we think of? Well, the Latin word *integer* was a word that meant “whole” or “entire.” It had the idea of soundness, incorruptibility, incorruptibility in the sense of honesty, firm adherence to a set of values, and completeness. When we think of Paul’s ministry of integrity or the integrity of Paul’s ministry, it certainly had soundness, incorruptibility, honesty. There was a firm adherence to values, the values derived from the Lord God. In that sense, Paul’s ministry was surely a ministry of integrity. We live in a day in which integrity is very important and it’s often rare in the experience of men. The book of Proverbs in the 19th chapter, and in the 1st verse, says, “Better is the poor, that walketh in his integrity, than he that is perverse in his lips and is a fool.”

The characteristic of Paul’s ministry was integrity; that is, he was true to his ideals, he was true to the message that had been given to him, he was true to the ministry, and honest in the proclamation of it and, also, fearless in the proclamation of it. The example of Paul, followed by the Christian church today, would deliver us from two plagues, with which our church is, I think, afflicted: First of all, an empty message, and secondly, an impotent ministry. Paul’s example, I think, underlines these two things. His ministry was not impotent. It’s clear that he spoke with all sincerity. Twice in this message he gave to the elders, he mentions the fact that he ministered with tears. It was something that he felt very deeply about. He said that “He was pure from the blood of all men,” which indicates that he felt that he had declared the Word of God boldly, and had not held back any of the message, for those with whom he came in contact. It is also stated that they wept sore and fell on Paul’s neck, when he left; and so, evidently, they appreciated the courage of Paul the apostle.

Some years ago, W. E. Sangster, one of the great British preachers, comment on an illustration in J. H. Jowett’s sermons, about twenty-five years before the time of Sangster. And Sangster said, “He said, ‘I once saw the track of a bleeding hare across the snow. That was Paul’s track across Europe.’” And Sangster said, “For the last twenty-five years, whenever I’ve thought of Paul’s missionary journeys, I’ve seen the track of a bleeding hare across the snow.” That surely

illustrates the apostle’s ministry. Wherever he went, he found bonds and afflictions awaiting him, because men are not happy to hear a word from God. Now, we are told, of course, that the kind of God that we have in heaven is the kind of God who has a ministry, simply, of love toward us. That kind of ministry, men welcome. But the kind of ministry that comes from the inspired Word of God is different, for it tells us of a God who is not only love, but a God who is just and righteous and holy. And men do not like to have dealings with a just and righteous and holy God because men are unholy.

Now, that’s hard to say, but it is true. And Paul said it. And Paul found difficulty in saying it. But his ministry was not impotent, because the Holy Spirit attends the true preaching of the Word of God with the power of conviction and conversion; and he does not attend the ministry that is contrary to the Word of God. And, secondly, Paul’s example underlines the fact that his message was not empty. Listen to how he describes it. He says, in the 27th verse, “It was all the counsel of God.” Now, to explain what was involved in that, he says in verse 21, he “preached repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” In verse 24, he says, “to testify of the grace of God.” In verse 25, he says, “I have gone among you preaching the kingdom of God.” And then, in verse 32, he calls it, “The word of His grace.” Paul didn’t major in rhetoric, he didn’t major in oratory, he didn’t major in the sensational. I don’t know what would have been the sensational kind of message that a modern preacher might have devised in the days of the Apostle Paul. I know what is a sensational type today, after all, you might find some minor indication in the Word of God that a message on the common market might have some significance. But, usually, in our society, when that kind of preaching takes place, ministry on the common market, ministry on Mid-East oil, ministry on nuclear war, ministry on other things of similar character; the intent is to attract an audience by that which is sensational.

One thing you learn about that after a few years is that if your ministry is the kind that is sensational, you attract people who like the sensation. And then when you want to preach about the serious things, they are not anxious to hear that. That’s human nature. So if your attraction is the

sensational, you will attract people who desire the sensation. You will attract those of lighter interests and significance. You have to learn through experience that you cannot attract people to one type of message by preaching another type of message. Paul didn’t major in rhetoric, oratory, and the sensational. He didn’t minister the latest ministerial fads like giving psychological, sociological therapy in the midst of his messages. That’s not the kind of thing that the apostle gave; though that is faddish in our Christian ministry today. Oratory, unfortunately, cannot conceal poverty. A withering criticism of Carlyle was once made of an individual who was delivering messages. And he said, “If that man had anything to say, he could say it.” “If that man had anything to say, he could say it.” You couldn’t more witheringly and damningly criticize a so-called minister of the gospel than to say something like that.

The absence of a message makes a preacher a charlatan. When the Old Testament prophets spoke, they spoke about their messages as being burdens. Now, I know that today people use that term. They will say, “My burden today is,” and if you think that they’re going to preach like the prophets, you are more often than not disappointed, because they don’t really have burdens. Burdens come from the Holy Spirit’s ministry to an individual. Pastoral bags of tricks today are totally inadequate before the human need. Human need is, ultimately, met in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the kind of preaching that neglects the gospel is bound to be fruitless, ultimately.

Not long ago, just a few weeks ago actually, a number of denominations met in their annual meetings. The Presbyterian Church had its general assemblies. There are, as you know, about twenty-five, at least or even more now, different Presbyterian denominations in the country. The Baptists met here recently in Dallas. The Methodists have also been meeting. One of these meetings, after the meeting, as its principle result of its meeting, they promulgated the fact that they were going to stress this year “evangelism.” Now, that sounds marvelous, and a person would surely applaud that. The only difficulty is that there is no real clear indication that the “evangel” is understood. In that particular group of people. It’s fundamental to stress upon evangelism that we know what the evangel is.

Now, the Apostle Paul knew what the evangel was. His message was not empty. This message that is delivered to the elders of the church at Ephesus is the only one delivered to Christians recorded by Luke in the book of the Acts. And so what we have is something rather significant; Paul’s message to a believing body. It’s an indication of his own ministry. It’s an exhortation to the elders. And, it’s a farewell. And this morning, I want to look at the vindication; and Paul will review his personal life, he will review his message, and then he will review his purpose and ministry. And that’s what we will stress as we look now at verse 17 through verse 19. And I want to say, right at the beginning, that no analysis can do justice to this tender, pathetic, personal persuasion on the part of the Apostle Paul.

Luke begins the account by saying, in the 17th verse, “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.” Now, we ought not to pass by this because there is something fundamental in this message that concerns not simply the Gospel message, but church life and church organization. And, in fact, while the Gospel is not bound up in church organization and church practice, true biblical church organization and church practice will make it so much easier to preach the Gospel of the grace of God.

Now, he addresses the elders of the church at Ephesus. Now, that is important because it tells us right at the beginning that there were more than one, there was more than one elder in the church at Ephesus. In other words, the churches of apostolic founding were churches that had plural leadership. The apostle called the elders of the church at Ephesus.

Now, it’s striking that people like to get away from the simple teaching of the Word of God concerning the organization of the church. It would be nice, they say, if we could lodge leadership in one man; that’s the customary thing, is it not? Paul said he held back nothing that was profitable to the churches. I should not, either. I should not say, because the majority of the Christian churches have put their authority in the hands of one man that we should do that, too. We follow the Word of God.

Luke says, they called the elders of the church at Ephesus. Now, in order to get away from the plain teaching of the Word of God, it’s not uncommon for men to say, “Well, perhaps, there were a number of house churches in the city of Ephesus and the elders of the church are the one leading elder from each of these house churches, who gathered with Paul at Miletus.” Now, one would have to say, that’s possible; but, you know, surely it makes sense, does it not, to say that it is much better to go by what is written than what is not written. Is it not true to say that the *onus probandi*, that is, the burden of proof rests upon those who affirm there were many churches with one elder, one principal elder, who gathered in Ephesus. I think, any reasonable man would say yes. But then, further, if you think of the church at Thessalonica; Paul had spent a considerable time in Ephesus, and it’s conceivable that there were some meetings about, in which there may have been an elder or so, different from the other elders in the city. But in Thessalonica, he spent only three weeks there, and yet he wrote back to them and spoke of the elders in the church at Thessalonica; using the plural. So it’s obvious that the idea that there was one elder who had the office of pastor is not Apostolic doctrine. The Apostolic doctrine is that the church is ruled by a body of elders. When Paul addressed the church at Philippi, did he address the church? Did he address the church as the pastor, the bishops and the deacons? No. Simply the bishops and the deacons. So it’s evident from the statement, “The elders of the church,” at Ephesus, that that body of Christians in Ephesus was ruled by a plurality of men, several in one church.

Now, furthermore, it’s very obvious from Acts chapter 20, that the term elder and the term bishop are the same term. In verse 28, we read, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, among which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops. In other words, the men are called elders in verse 17, are called bishops in verse 28. And so those who are elders are bishops and the bishops are elders. Bishops is not a separate office; it’s a reference to the office of elder. And if there is any question about it, turn simply to Titus chapter 1, read verse 5 and verse 7, and there, Paul makes the same point in his message to Titus. So we learn that there are two offices in the church; the office of deacon, the office of elder. If we want to hold the office of priest, as an office, in which

all of us participate; those three offices. Every Christian a priest, some men elders, some men deacons. Paul and Luke appear to agree on that point.

Furthermore, the elders do pasturing work. Verse 28 says that the elders are to feed or shepherd the church of God. All of the elders shepherd; all of the elders do pastoral work. But the idea of the office of the pastor is not found in the New Testament. The spiritual gift of pastor/teacher is found. But spiritual gift and office are different. A man with the spiritual gift of office of pastor/teacher, might be an elder or he might not be an elder. Paul makes that plain when he says in 1 Timothy chapter 5 in verse 17. “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those that labor in the Word and doctrine.” So there were two types of elders; that is, all ruled, but some had gifts of ministry. But they were still elders. And even though they did pastoral work, they were not holding the office of pastor. There is no such in the New Testament. No individual in the New Testament is ever addressed as the pastor. We have invented that office. It’s not a New Testament office at all.

Why do I say that? Well, in this one respect, I follow Paul. I’m not keeping back anything that is profitable for you. It’s important that you understand how the early church was organized, because it frees the early church to carry on its ministry in it, most expeditiously. Now, let me very clearly say, there are some churches that are organized according to the Scripture that for various other reasons are not very fruitful. Then there are some that are not organized according to Scripture that frequently are quite fruitful. I only say, they could be more fruitful, if they were organized in the scriptural way.

We are ruled by elders, a body of elders, and I am thankful for that. We have deacons; I’m speaking of the Christian church at large. We have deacons and everybody is a priest of God. The idea of the office of pastor does not exist in the New Testament.

Now, in the Anglican Church, you might say, well, the Anglicans have bishops. Yes, but the Anglicans often are wise enough to admit that that office is not found in the New Testament; that it arose after the time of the New Testament. They argue not that it is taught in the New Testament,

but that it’s useful and fruitful for the ministry of the church and, therefore, justifiable. I think, it is much better to let the New Testament teach us the way in which we should organize the church.

So Paul says, in words that, I think, are very significant for us. Luke says, “He called the elders of the church.” These are the men into whose hands are committed the responsibility of guiding, shepherding, and guarding the flock of God. And we should never be disappointed that this is what God has demanded of us. You can see, of course, that the early church derived its leadership from the example of the synagogue, where the elders supervise the work, which they regard as the work of the Lord God.

Now, Paul goes on to say that, we’ll say more about this next week, “Serving the Lord with all humility of mind and with many tears, and testings, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews.” Now, the apostle claims a selfless slavery of the Lord Jesus Christ. I do not think that Paul is being arrogant or proud. If one looks at Paul’s ministry, you cannot help but agree with him. He served the Lord with all humility of mind. He was not interested in himself. He did not ask for their money, their silver, their gold. He did not ask for their clothes. He ministered to his own needs by the work of his hands. And, further, he says, “I ministered for the benefit of those who were with me.” And so you could not accuse Paul of serving for money. And you certainly can accuse a lot of professing Christian preachers today of that. And some who have admitted it, as well. So he served the Lord. He describes himself when he wrote the Romans as a servant, a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ; that selfless slavery that belongs to the true servant of the Lord.

I have a good friend; he has at the top of his correspondence, which he’s had printed, Ross Rainey, “servant of Jesus Christ.” No degrees, although he has some degrees, no titles; well, that’s the greatest title of all, “servant of Jesus Christ.” And he has it in quotes because, of course, he derives it from Scripture. That, I think, is the attitude we all are to have. This is not simply for people who preach or teach, but this is for all of us. We are servants of the Lord. And God has put us somewhere, in order to have him first in our service at that particular place.

There was an elderly Scottish woman who was being interviewed by the pastor to see if she could join the Scottish Presbyterian Church. And she was having a little difficulty with the questions that were asked her. And, finally, she said, “Well, Sir, I want you to know I cannot answer your hard questions; but one thing I do know, I would gladly die for him.” Well, that’s the kind of service that the Lord would love to have from all of us.

Now, having said that, Paul reviews his message in verse 20 and 21. It’s a remarkably simple summary in verses 20 and 21. For all he says is, simply, that he preached repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. There the response is upon the human side of things; the human response to the message. Later on, he will give the other side, when he talks about the gospel of the grace of God. Some have sought to see a kind of *kiasmos* in verse 21, that is, “Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,” as being repentance belonging particularly to the Greeks and faith belonging particularly to the Jews, because the Gentiles did need to turn from their evil ways and the Jews did need to realize that a man was not saved by keeping the Law, but rather by resting in what Christ had done on the cross at Calvary. We cannot be sure of that. “Repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Well, that’s very important and, of course, when we talk about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, we are talking in the case of repentance about change of mind, leading to a change in conduct. Jim Packer likes to say, “Mere credence, without trusting, does not save. Mere remorse, without turning, does not save.” God’s grace has marvelously adopted a method suitable to our condition, because we cannot do anything to please the Lord, and so our salvation is dependent upon faith, and the faith that is commanded of us, is the faith that is conferred to us and upon us by the work of the Holy Spirit; for faith is the gift of God.

If we were to ask: What is the essence of faith? Well, faith, I like what Adolph Saphir, a Jewish Christian once said. He said, “Faith is the echo of the Word of God in the soul of man.” In other words, a person has faith when he simply recognizes that the Bible is true and he rests upon

the things that the Word of God state. That is faith. And so when I see that the Lord Jesus has died upon the cross for sinners and that forgiveness of sins and salvation is offered through the merits of his atoning covenantal sacrifice, when I rest upon that, that’s faith. To rest upon what Christ has done is faith. God is satisfied with what Christ has done. And by God’s grace, I have come to be satisfied with what Christ has done. That’s faith. That’s what it is to believe. It’s simply to say, “amen,” to the Word of God and what it says concerning our condition and concerning what Christ has done, and the benefits that flow from what he has done.

Now, I skipped over something that I don’t want to skip over because, I think, it’s important. In verse 20, Paul said, “I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you.” Now, you might ask, What was profitable? Well, he says in verse 27, “I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.” So if he declared all the counsel of God and if he said, “I’ve not kept back anything that is profitable,” it’s obvious that he thinks that all of the Word of God is profitable. Now, that’s very unwelcome; not simply to unbelievers. That’s very unwelcome to believers. Isn’t that startling? Strange, but it’s true. Parts of the Word of God are unpalatable and unwelcome to believing or professing believing men. Take the church at Galatia; the Apostle Paul had to write to them in the 4th chapter of the letter that he wrote to them, and said to them these words, verse 16, Galatians 4, “Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?” There are some things that cause individuals to react violently against the expression of them. The apostle preached the things that were welcome, the things that were unpalatable and unwelcome; integrity of complete honesty in preaching. He preached the things that he knew were in the Bible, but he also knew would be unwelcomed to his audience.

I have had a number of preachers say to me, in discussing various doctrines, “I cannot preach that doctrine, because it’s upsetting to the people.” That’s not Pauline. Now, it’s true, there are some times in which a person should not preach one particular doctrine but preach something else. But sooner or later, you must preach all the counsel of God. If there are things that you hold back and never preach, you are not preaching in the Pauline fashion.

There’s a young man who used to be in Believers Chapel. He’s pastor of a church now. He’d been in the church for six or seven years. After he left the Chapel, someone said, “How can you stay in this particular environment and not preach the doctrine of divine election? What do you do?” He said, “When ever I come to it,” he actually was honest enough to say this, “Whenever I come to it, I pass by it without comment.” That’s not Pauline. That is contrary to Paul’s teaching. Paul said, “I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you.” And if the Holy Spirit has revealed it, it’s in the Word of God, and Paul says it’s profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction and righteousness that the man of God may be perfect thoroughly furnished unto every good work. You can be sure of this, that Christians will never reach maturity if they do not have exposure to the whole of the Word of God. I am grateful that we are not limited to preachers; we have the Word of God and many people find the truth in spite of their preacher because they read the Scriptures. He kept back nothing that was profitable for them.

James Henry Thornwell, the great South Carolina Presbyterian minister, once said of Robert Breckinridge, famous Kentucky Presbyterian minister and grandfather of Benjamin B. Warfield, as he was describing the ministry of Robert Breckinridge in his theology, he said, “He is never afraid of the truth. He never minces or prevaricates, nor handles the doctrines of grace. To use the comparison of Roland Hill, “like an ass mumbling a thistle.”” Now, a person has to understand some of the Old English, to understand, I think, what that means. To mumble is to chew, as if you had no teeth. So, I guess, if we can think of a person trying to chew without his teeth, we can think of what mumbling is. And if you’ve been to Scotland and you’ve ever had a thistle in your hand, you know that it’s a very prickly piece of vegetation. It’s the national flower of the Scots. And there may be some connection with Scottish temperament; I don’t know. But, at any rate, it’s very prickly. I couldn’t imagine putting a thistle in my mouth and trying to chew it. You would do it very gingerly. Well, that’s what Mr. Thornwell meant. He doesn’t handle doctrine gingerly, not “like an ass mumbling a thistle.”

And so many of our preachers today do handle the Word of God “like an ass mumbling a thistle.” Everything is handled gingerly. And so when they come to texts that have to do with things like foreordination, we’ll pass that by, divine election and predestination, we’ll pass that by or we’ll give some Arminian interpretation of it that makes it sound palatable after all. Or when we come to sin, we’ll not preach that all men are sinners and headed for a Christless eternity. And we’ll not avoid the term “Lake of Fire” or Hell, simply because some person in the media may refer to an individual as one of those old fashioned people who preaches hellfire and damnation. Why not? It’s in the Bible. It’s profitable. It’s the kind of thing that might wake up some people and if it will not wake up some people that’s their responsibility before the Lord God. We have in love and consideration given them the truth of God. That’s our responsibility. That’s what Paul considered his to be. The atonement by the cross of Christ alone, not simply by good works, not simply by good intentions, not simply by culture, not by joining the church, not by being religious, not by sitting around a table where the ordinances are practiced, or going into the waters of baptism but through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The advent of our Lord, the Second Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, is that part of ministry? The kingdom of God as Paul speaks about? He kept back nothing that was profitable. And I know that our elders, from talking with them, do not want to keep back anything that is profitable for us. “All the counsel of the Word of God.” The difficult sections, the easy sections, we want to preach all the Word of God. And Paul did it publicly and from house to house. When Paul called on you, it was not a time of fun and fellowship. When he called, we discussed the things of the Word of God. His social calls were scriptural calls, so he said.

Now, finally, there is a review of his purpose and ministry in verse 22 through verse 24, and we shouldn’t pass that by. “And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me.” Well, why not? He’s preaching the Word of God. Men crucified the Lord Jesus, because he was true to Scripture. It’s not surprising that his servant should suffer. If his

servants have a good time in the world, Jesus said, “It’s because they are not really his servants.” He said the fact that they persecuted the Lord and Master, means they will persecute you.

So we shall suffer for it, but in the meantime, God will gather his people, his chosen people. He will gather them into a relationship to the Lord God and give them the forgiveness of their sins. Paul says, “So that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.” What Paul judged to be worth dying for was the gospel of the grace of God. It’s never worthwhile to die for a doctrine, that will itself after a century or two die out. Paul knew this doctrine would not die out. He knew that if we should have two thousand years of preaching the gospel, that that gospel would still be the gospel that he proclaimed. Call it what you will, if you want to call it Calvinism, that’s all right. I don’t mind that. “Calvinism,” Mr. Spurgeon used to say, “is just another nickname for the gospel.” But I know one thing! The gospel of the grace of God is not the parasitical liberalism that one hears in so many of our churches today or the rebellious radicalism that also appears under the guise of Christian profession. When he says, “All the counsel of God,” and when he speaks of “the word of His grace,” and the “Gospel of the grace of God,” he’s saying simply that salvation is altogether of the Lord God.

Charles Hodge used to say, “Salvation is all of the Lord and that truth is engraved upon almost every page of the Bible. It is of the Lord in its conception.” Long before there was ever an angel that floated over the ether of God’s creation, He had thought of the gospel of the grace of God and had determined that it should eventually be preached. He is the one who revealed it in the Garden of Eden, when he came down after man sinned and said, “Where art thou?” The beginning of the revelation of the truth of the gospel of the grace of God. It is of God in its execution. It is the un-aided work of a solitary conqueror, the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is likened, that is, the position of it is likened to a banquet not a pot-luck supper where everyone brings a little something in order to participate. That is, a little something of Pelagian works or semi-Pelagian free will or Arminian cooperation with the grace of God or even Lutheran non-resistance to the work of God. The

Scriptures say that we are dead in trespasses and sins, we have nothing to bring to this banquet. It is something that God has done in the magnificent conception of his magnificent grace. How thankful we should be that in the grace of God, he has opened our minds to see what others have not had the privilege to see as yet. And how grateful we should be, in the proclamation of that truth to others to sit and enjoy the banquet and never say anything to anyone about us is to be unfaithful to the apostle himself. He didn’t hold back anything that was profitable to those Ephesians. No novelties of the hour, no interest in the sensation; he was interested in the salvation of souls.

How we can, in our society today, be more interested in the body than in the soul, is a puzzle that one can never fully understand. How it is possible for an individual to be more interested in the physical, which is temporary, than in the spiritual, which is eternal, is only an amazing testimony to the sin of men. The joggers, the exercisers, the health institutions, all of those things have their little tiny place in a man’s life, but most of all is his soul, his spirit, his eternal soul. My dear friend, have you made arrangements for the eternal existence of your soul? Do you have the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ? Who offered a sacrifice for sinners? Of which are you. And have you, by the grace of God, as I said a moment ago, had the Word of God echo in your soul? And have you said, essentially, Amen, Lord? I’m trusting only in Christ and what he has done. I know salvation is of the Lord. I know I’m a sinner. I know I cannot save myself. I know there is nothing I can do that is the means of my salvation, but that which Christ has done.

We invite you, as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ, come to him. Believe in him. That decision is your own personal decision but you must make it, if you are to know Christ and the forgiveness of sins.

May God help you to know the gospel of the grace of God, God’s marvelous movement to men who are sinners.

Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We thank Thee, Lord, for the integrity of Paul the apostle, that he didn’t hold back anything that was profitable. We desire, Lord, to follow in his steps. And we desire, Lord, even more, that men and women may come to the knowledge of themselves and then to the knowledge of Christ, and to the knowledge of the grace of God in their own personal salvation. O God, if there is someone here present this morning, who has never yet believed in Christ, O, give them no rest or peace, Lord, until they rest in Him.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.