



"Faithfulness"

Acts 19.17-20; Acts 20.25-38 & Revelation 2.4-6

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Guest Preacher

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Acts 19.17-20; Acts 20.25-39 & Revelation 2.4-6 (New International Version)

Acts 19:17-20

¹⁷ When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. ¹⁸ Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. ¹⁹ A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. ^[a] ²⁰ In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 19:19](#) A drachma was a silver coin worth about a day's wages.

Acts 20:25-38

²⁵ "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, ^[a] which he bought with his own blood. ^[b] ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

³² "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

³⁶ When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. ³⁷ They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. ³⁸ What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 20:28](#) Many manuscripts of *the Lord*
- b. [Acts 20:28](#) Or *with the blood of his own Son*.

Revelation 2:4-6

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. ⁵ Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. ⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.



Well, my name is Gordon MacDonald. My wife, Gail, and I are from New England and we are very glad to be here, especially since the temperature is about 30 degrees warmer here than back at home. This is the third time I've done this morning [preached at WHPC], so I'm hoping by now I might get it right. I didn't realize the choir would remain in its place. It brings new meaning to the phrase, preaching to the choir. You have been very warm in your welcome to Gail and me in these last hours and it is a treat to be with you all today.

There was a man in my life who didn't do church and certainly did not profess any kind of Christian belief, but who if you listen to him very often was probably totally sold out to business in his life and everything he talked about had some kind of business attachment to it. His vocabulary was all business terminology and eventually if you had any kind of conversation about any subject, it came back to what it means to be profitable and to run organizations. He used to think of me, for example, in the job that I did as a lead pastor of a church and rather than call me a pastor to him I was the company president or the CEO.

One day, realizing that our church was growing, he but that together with the notation that the offerings must be getting larger and larger every week and so he wanted to know if I was getting a bigger cut of the pie each week and thought it would be a good idea – which I thought was good idea too [audience laughter] but our elders were not that impressed and so we went back to the same old same old.

He was an interesting man and one day in the course of a conversation he surprised me with this question, he asked, **“So, what would you say is your church's elevator story?”** Well that was an interesting question, first of all because at the time did not know what an elevator story is, but I was trying to bluff him for a while to try to figure out what it might be so I wouldn't act that naïve. But finally I had to say to him, “So, what is an elevator story, anyway?” His answer went something like this, he said, “Well, suppose you are downtown in Boston and you get on an elevator to go to the 30th floor and just before the doors close another guy gets on and you are both dressed in business attire, you're obviously on a mission and so he says to you as the doors are closing, ‘What is your organization do?’ Now, you've got thirty floors to answer the question and put it such a way that it is so compelling that when you reach the 30th floor and the doors open up, he proposes that the two of you do a twenty million deal.” That was my friend's version of an elevator story.

He went on to make this point that a good elevator story is not a mission statement about what you hope to do, it is not a strategic long-range plan about how you are going do it, but **an elevator story is a snapshot of who you are right now.** What is life like for you and your organization? Well, you can take that principle and you can broaden out and say that everybody has an elevator story – every married couple should have an elevator story, every group of friends that covenant together to achieve something or learn something or to fellowship together, there ought to be an elevator story there.



A church ought to have an elevator story – a ability to say, this is who we are and what we are doing right now. So, for some days I went home and tried to think through the elevator story of our church and I'm not sure I came up with a compelling one that would translate into a twenty million deal, but it was a good exercise none the less.

The text of scriptures that you heard read this morning is really a part elevator story and it begs the question, so, what happens once the elevator story as been told? Can you maintain it? Can you enlarge it? Can you keep it enthusiastic? Or, do a lot of elevator stories run out of gas?

In the Bible we have the story of any number of churches in the New Testament and many founded by St. Paul and some of the people who were on his missionary team. Among those many churches is the Church at Ephesus, which geographically located is a little bit up country in what we today know as the country of Turkey. It was a prosperous city. It was known not only for its industry, but it was known for being the center point of great cultic movement of those days. It was a city not only economically prosperous, but you would have to say, drenched with immorality and all forms of evil. Into that city one day comes St. Paul. When he leaves it - some would say he is there for at least two years - when he leaves it there is a congregation, we don't know how sizable it is, but whatever it is, it is a cluster of people, both Jew and Greek who have organized their lives around Jesus and His Gospel and it is quite a place and this is a very powerful little church.

Interesting enough about the **Ephesian** churches that when you compare it to the all the other churches in the New Testament, in my opinion, you may know more about this church than any other New Testament church. You have the story of its founding in the Book of Acts. You have the record of one of the most important conversations which we'll see in a moment in which St. Paul talks with the Epesian leaders – you have the sixth chapter epistle that we call the Epistle to the Ephesians which is very instructive and then you have this memo in effect I call it that anyway and in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 2 which give or take a few years probably comes 30-35 years later – so that you are allowed to see beginning, during and to some extent an ending – a commentary on where things are many years later. So, we know a lot about this church. We can learn a lot from it.

The text that were read to you this morning, I'm sure as you listen you wonder how they all fit together – well they don't really that much, but they do allow us to trace a common theme as to what could happen to a church over a period of time. Now, this little caveat – you can not only make a case that this subject matter is germane to church, but you could see the same thing being useful, relevant to each of us as individuals – to those of us who are married, to those of us who have family relationships, to those of us who may be singled or married who are parts of small groups that are hanging together over a period of time for a purpose. So, the principles that kind of ooze out texts of scripture are useful in one way or another for all of us.



I must tell you, one of the reasons I'm even talking this morning about this is that they have caused me to do a lot of thinking.

Now, back to elevator stories. **In the Book of Acts, Chapter 19, we have a pretty extensive description of how this church got started and if you read it verse by verse throughout the whole chapter, the church has a rather chaotic start.** It is made up of both Jews and Greeks and there is a lot of wild stuff going on. You must remember when you read the story of the Ephesus Church, it is the gentiles, the men, women, younger/older people who come together and begin to build a Christian base to their lives are people who come out of rank paganism. Men do not know how to treat their wives in a Christian way. Families do not know how to act and think in a Christian manner. Business people of any type do not know how to conduct their business life in a Christian perspective. This is all brand new stuff to them, so you are going to expect, as you read between the lines and the spaces, that there is a lot of naiveté, a long of mistakes, a lot of craziness in a church of this type.

But in the middle of the description comes this paragraph that was read for us and let me review it rather quickly, speed reading it to make these two or three points: "When all these kinds of things were going on," the writer says, "It became known to the Jews and the Greeks living in Ephesus and they were all seized with fear." Interesting word 'fear' – it is not a word I particular would have chosen had I been writing. It really translates into words like – respect and renowned and awestruck. In other words as this church came into being, regardless of its size, everybody around made it a talking point. Everybody was fabulously impressed with the newness, the strength, the uniqueness of what was going on. They spoke about it with great respect. They did not ridicule it or scorn it. Then it goes on, "The name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor."

You know you can't say that often about institutional Christian church life here in America today. The name of Jesus is not held in high honor by lots of people and it would be for many reasons and we need to think about that sometimes and talk about that. But here in Ephesus, these people were so profoundly impacted by the Gospel, lives changed so dramatically that those watching heard the name of Jesus and whether they were believers or unbelievers, they were holding the name of Jesus in high honor and high esteem.

Then comes this comment, "Many of those who believed, now came and openly confessed their evil deeds." In other words, they began to renounce old ways of life and one of the things that marked the Ephesian culture was a lot of varying forms of witchcraft and sorcery. So, these people were into - shall we say it – weird stuff and as Jesus becomes more and more powerful in their lives, they recognize that the Lord is incompatible with all these old things. They are beginning to open up their hearts and renouncing and repenting of all this and one of the things they do symbolize that is to burn all the books or scrolls which were part of the old evil ways. You can imagine this huge fire. This interesting little detail is thrown in by the writer. When they calculated the value of all the scrolls, the total came to 50,000 drachmas. If



you tried to translate that into monetary values that you and I would appreciate, 50,000 drachmas probably computes into the wages of 40,000 working days – go figure, those are fairly large numbers. The value of the books being burned is enormous. We are talking about lots and lots of bucks here and it gives you an idea of how powerful things in Ephesus were that day when this church comes into being.

In this way the writer says, “The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” It just wasn’t words, but changed lives were occurring, changed relationships and everybody say this and had to deal with it. That is what I think is the elevator story – the Ephesians Church. It is a quick strobe like photography of one day in the life of an early Christian movement and all the things that are going on and when you stand back from it - you suck in your breath and say to yourself, wouldn’t it be an incredible experience to be a part of all that?

We have the elevator story, but now the question begins to arise, “Will that story last?”

Because in all relationships – church family, marriage, friends – you can’t assume that every day is going to stay the same. All relationships of any number of people are always dynamic. The relationships are always growing or they are retarding – nothing stays the same. The elevator story is really not a photograph, it becomes a video and it becomes something that can go from good to bad or whatever so that you have to be really diligent and St. Paul knows this.

When you turn the page over to the second reading of the morning in Acts, Chapter 20, you’ll learn something very interesting about the mind of Paul the pastor leader that is of deep concern to him. This text of scripture, and I must tell you that I’m absolutely guessing here – probably comes in the life of the Ephesian church 2-5 years later than the elevator story we just reviewed for a second. Paul is traveling around and he comes to the little port town of Miletus which is just several miles away from Ephesus – it is down at the edge of the sea where Ephesus is up country. So, Paul cannot leave the ship he is traveling on, he has sent word and invited all the leaders of the Ephesian church to come down and see him.

Now this particular visit is particularly poignant because Paul is convinced that he will never see these people again this side of heaven. He is on his way to Jerusalem by intention and he is smelling already that when he gets there that some things are going to happen – he will be arrested, likely transported to Rome – that is his intention that he will get to Rome one way or the other and it is likely to end up quite probably with his execution. As far as Paul can see things with his relative limited vision of things – this is the last time he will see these people with whom he has spent quantities of time and dearly loves and is very proud of. What you have in this visit and it is a very interesting text – are the last thoughts of Paul.

As I did in the other services, I quoted **a couple of lines of Shakespeare: “The tongues of dying men enforce attention like a perfect harmony.”** Translated it means when someone knows they are dying, listen carefully to what they say because you are likely to hear a summation of their most important thoughts – the things they wish the most for you. Maybe some of you



have had that experience with someone you loved that you see them for the last time and they give you their blessing or they give you a final summary word of advice or counsel about what they hope for you.

Well that is what is going on in Acts, Chapter 20? If you read it in its entirety, it is a beautiful expression of what it means to be a spiritual leader among people. The key paragraph which has marked me deeply over the years, goes like this: Paul says, "I know that none of you among who I've gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you that I am innocent of the blood of all men." That is kind of a weird statement, but it is typically an ancient statement which Paul is saying to these men and women – *I've given you the very best I had, I've held nothing back, I can't think of anything I regret, I can't think of anything unsaid, it is all there and therefore before God I don't have to apologize for the way I've been a leader among you. I've not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. I've just told you everything that God every revealed to me about the Gospel. Therefore, [here are the important words] keep watch over yourselves and all the flock.* You will be happy to know that in Paul's language you are a flock. For him the word picture of a congregation often is a flock of sheep. I hope in its best view of things. He says, "You've been made by the Holy Spirit to be overseers of this flock," and then these key words, "the shepherds of the flock of God, the church of God which he has bought with his own blood."

I told the folks last night when we were together for a small meeting that those lines probably explain to a considerable extent why I have spent and Gail with me, 40+ years in the pastoral ministry. When I was a seminary student, one of the favorite conversations of students, and it exists to this day, people young men and women love to criticize the church. They can't wait until they can take over and straighten it all out and we were like that in those days. We would sit every Monday morning and the favorite comment would begin, "You can't believe what the pastor preached about yesterday? He really dropped the ball." We'd go on and on with our, we knew so much at the age of 20.

Finally one day after this constant succession of carping on the church, a professor came up behind me overhearing the conversation that we were all into and he picked my Bible up off a stack of books, turned to this passage which I've just read, he put it in front of me and said, "Gordon, please read this line to everybody." I read this **"Keep over the church God which he purchased with his blood."** The professor said, "Gordon, what do you think God thinks about the church?" I looked back and said, "Well, it must be precious." He asked, "How would you know that?" He answered, "I bought it with his own blood."

You see all my life I'd been taught that Jesus died for me, that he bought me with his own blood and he probably did for you too. But, no one had ever said to my hearing – Jesus purchased the church on the cross, that the church may be the most precious thing in the economy of God. Boy, does that change your opinion of the church. No matter how messy it is, it still belongs to God. In those ancient days most shepherds were not owners of the sheep that they oversaw,



they were there on behalf of an owner who lived the good life in town while they were out night and day taking care of the sheep on the hillside. The church belongs to God; it does not belong to me or the elders. It belongs to God and he bought it with his blood. That is an interesting thing to speculate about.

Now Paul says this and it gets really, nitty gritty, **“Watch over this church because I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”** You see Paul has picked this metaphor of the wolves, why, because the people of that day would be very conversant with sheep, shepherds and wolves. Without a doubt most of them were conversant with what wolves do to sheep – they’d see what happens when a wolf has been among the sheep during the night when shepherds have not be vigilant – they’ve seen the carcasses, the torn bodies, the losses that the owner of the sheep take because the wolves were not kept from coming among the flock. Paul seizes this metaphor, if he were talking to people like you and me today out of more modern environment he might be saying – what out for the scammers, the thieves, the deceivers, the swindlers who come among you and want to bit into your retirement and that kind of thing. He would use that word picture to talk about what can happen to the church. But here it is wolves and we are the flock and we’re the shepherds together and he says, “Sooner or later this beautiful elevator story of yours will be attacked by those from within the church and without the church who for political purposes, power purposes, financial purposes, name your poison will come in and try to take this elevator story and shred it and the world is dotted with churches that once had wonderful elevator stories, but something happened, the shepherds weren’t faithful, the flock wasn’t cared for and you get a mess.

We who are pastors see this happen to marriages. We see young couples walk the aisle that are deeply in love, passionate about their affection for one another, the idea of their romance is so profound and we try not to be cynical, but we know that in a certain percentage of these wonderful, beautiful elevator stories that start a marriages that ten years down the line this couple will be glaring at each other, blaming each other, they will no longer respect each other, there will be hostility, there will be anger, there will be a desire to run from it. What has happened to the elevator story – the wolves have shown up and little bit by little this beautiful relationship has been torn into pieces. Same thing happens in small groups were one day you love this group of friends you are with and you share so much and you open up your lives for each other and then one day something goes wrong – the wolves have showed up.

What Paul says here to the Ephesian leaders is very, very relevant then and now. You can enlarge this principle and you can say to everybody in the room, don’t want to be gloomy, don’t want to be pessimistic, but you are not being realistic if you don’t understand that sooner or later every dimension of relationship in your life, even your relationship to yourself will come under the attack of the wolves – they will come at each one us and the question is: What happens then?



Well that leaves us to the third reading because when you move over to the Book of Revelation you get a hint at must have happened, because now 25-35 years later we get these words and I have to keep it very brief. The writer is saying in effect, “Yes, you are still going on, the church is still persevering, the doors are still opened up, some good things are happening – yet, I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen. Repent, because if you don’t I will come and take your lamp stand away.” Which is a way of saying – if things keep going the way are going, this church may die. God will not keep it in motion indefinitely. If you do the wrong things, if you allow the wolves to the door, sooner or later the lamp stand goes out. The candle that marks the light of Christ’s presence is in effect extinguished, it is gone.

Now, look at the three things he said to really get their attention. First of all – you’ve forsaken your first love. The thing that got you into motion in the first place, that explosion of joy in the original elevator story is not there anymore. He might be saying that you are just going through the motions. You are married to this person, but you don’t love them. You are going to church, but you are not experiencing the power and the love of Christ in your going. Among your friends you are just living habitual with obligation, but the original joy is gone.

Then he uses another metaphor – you use to be at this height, but now you are down here. How did it happen that you fell from there to here? Why weren’t you more vigilant? Why weren’t you more careful in the conduct of this relationship? You were here and now you are there. You’ve have forgotten your elevator story.

And then this final one word – it is time to repent and see if you can find your way back, because God waits for broken people to come to him and admit that they’ve lost their first love, that they’ve fallen from this heart, that things aren’t the way they were meant to be and something new has to reoccur.

I just have no doubt that in this sanctuary, with this many people, that I’m talking to people who have been there and done that and maybe they are there right now. Even in listening to these words from the scripture, you saying to yourself, “Yes, there was once a very vibrant elevator story in my life, but it is not there now. Yes, we had this, but we don’t have it now. My experience was this, but it is not now.”

I know that kind of language. **Twenty-five years ago there came a moment in my own personal journey of faith where I hit bottom with a thud.** Where through choices that I made there was a moment of total failure, of complete shame, of a desire to just run from it all – fallen from the height down to here. It was a moment where it would never have occurred to me that I would stand in front of you this morning and you would, in a courtesy way listen to what I had to say. I just never would have thought it possible.



It came to something of head on a Sunday morning. My wife, Gail, had left the bed to go out to the other part of the house to attend to things that were on her mind and I was by myself sitting on the edge of the bed and the first thought that was coming to me is that all my friends are headed to their churches right now and many of them are going to preach the Bible in the next few moments and I have nothing to do. There is nobody who wants to hear me preach. There is no one who wants to look to me today and say that he is worth following. There is no one who has a desire to hear a word I might say. I'm just here by myself. In that moment of totally despair where you have that drastic feeling of having lost first love and you were here and you are now here – in that moment I turned the television on to make some noise.

The first thing that comes on the screen when it lit up was the face of Robert Schuller and before I could change the channel he began to speak. I was not really in a mood to hear Robert Schuller that morning to be quite blunt with you. Schuller says, "I want to preach today about enthusiasm." And I said out loud back to him, "Whatever else do you preach about?" However, before I could switch him off, he came back and said, "Let me tell you what enthusiasm is. The word means God inside of you. It refers to a vision, a joy and an energy which is manufactured out of the depths of one's heart and it is oblivious, it is not dependent upon the circumstances outside of your life." I listened to that and I thought how insightful.

You know for many, many years, when people characterized Gordon, they would say, "Oh, he is a man of lot of visions; he has a lot of ideas." Then they would laugh and say, "If you don't want anything more to do, don't hang around Gordon, because before long he'll have a vision for your life." I loved hearing people say that about me. What a wonderful thing for people to say, "He is an idea person. He always comes up with fresh new things to do." But, they weren't saying that anymore, why, because there was no energy in my heart in that moment. I had fallen from that height. I remember sitting there thinking, if you've lost your vision – or to use new language – if your elevator story is no longer valid can you ever get it back? I wasn't sure you could get it back. Finally, I got out of bed and into the living room where Gail was and I remember sitting beside her and saying to her, "You know it has occurred to me this morning that for the first time that over the last many months I've been living off your enthusiasm. If there is any vision in our home right now, it is coming from you and I've like a neighbor warming himself off his neighbor's fire and that is not fair to you, it is not right. I'm going to do whatever it takes to get my vision back or to retrieve my elevator story. Over the next many days and weeks, you don't have the time for me to go through all of that – it is a very personal, powerful story for me. Personally, I had to go before God and ask if it is possible to go from where I am now to back where I once was in a refreshing way. Is it possible to retrieve your first love? **Is it possible to bring your elevator story back to life? Let me tell you this morning the answer is an empathetic yes.**

Yes, because we worship a God who is gracious and kind, who offers people second chances, ways back and in fact in some ways he can use us more after we have made the fall and come back then he could have used the first time around. Some of you this morning need to hear



that, because you have marriages which have lost their first love and you have a spiritual journey which has fallen from its original height, you've lost your vision, you've lost your enthusiasm and your elevator story is no longer valid. However, we have a God who waits and listens patiently for the person who says, "I want to come back." We want to come back and to the extent that you might be any of those people, God waits to hear the cry in your heart.

I need to tell you today that I am more enthusiastic about life than I've been, in all my life. I love the work I do more than I've ever loved it at any time in my life. I love my wife more today than I've ever loved her before. I love everything that God has planted in this life as he has made the elevator story come back to life. This is the best year of my life and it can be also for you.

In the story of the Ephesian church we have a story of ourselves. Pick whatever level you want to play the story at: individual, marital, friends or church, wherever you want to climb to, wherever you want to be – the story of the Ephesian church can be your story and that is my hope for you this morning as you go back across these texts and they come alive to you as they came alive to me.

Let's pray.

I pray Lord today for men and women of varying age who hear the sound of my voice that it would not be my voice they hear, but the voice of God. That this morning they will have heard in the beautiful music, the prayer and even in the preaching a word of hope, a word of renewal and a word of the second chance. Lord, take our individual elevator stories and bring them, if necessary, back to life. This is prayer always for myself and for my friends. Amen.

