

A Farewell Sermon (Acts 20:17-38)

Big Idea: When someone serves God faithfully and leaves, the church responds with love, sorrow, and blessing.

When someone serves God faithfully in a local church, something remarkable happens.

That's what happened with Paul in Ephesus, and it's what's happened here in our church for the past couple of years.

As part of his third missionary journey, Paul stayed in Ephesus and lived there for about three years. God used him while he was there, and the church in Ephesus had been marked by his ministry. They knew him. He'd lived among them. He was their pastor, their brother, their friend, and their fellow worker. He had already left, but on a layover a short distance away from Ephesus, he called the leaders of the Ephesian church for one last talk, knowing that he'd never see them again.

We're experiencing some of the same emotions as a church. Thankfully, Nathan and Elaine aren't going too far. We definitely plan on seeing them again. But we know what it's like to be marked by someone's ministry, and then experience some of the emotions that come with their departure.

I thought this passage would be a helpful guide for guiding us through what we're experiencing today. Specifically, this passage leaves us with two things that Nathan and Elaine take with them, and two things we get to send with them.

Two Things They're Taking

Here are the two things that Nathan and Elaine take with them as they leave us.

They're leaving with a good track record.

Paul was able to look back on his ministry. He was able to reflect on his ministry among them with the knowledge that he had served God faithfully, and that he had also served the congregation well.

Specifically, he lists four qualities of his ministry that marked his faithfulness. They're the same qualities that have marked Nathan's ministry among us. I could say each of these things about Nathan and his ministry among us.

- **He served God selflessly** – “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...” (Acts 20:18-19). Paul was subservient. He served the Lord, even when it involved humility, tears, and trials. The word *serve* here doesn't simply mean to do acts of service. It means to be owned by another, to perform the duties of a slave. One of the marks of a faithful ministry is knowing that you don't belong to yourself, that you belong to God, and that your primary desire is to please him. That characterized Paul's ministry. It characterized Nathan's ministry. It should be how all of us aim to live.
- **He preached the Word faithfully** – “...how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance to-

ward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ ... 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" (Acts 20:20-21, 26-27). Paul did not hesitate to preach what was profitable, even when it was hard. He didn't soft-pedal the truth. He went out of his way to declare and teach people to turn to God and put their faith in Jesus. Notice the relentless focus on Jesus. God blesses a ministry that is centered on Jesus. I think of what Charles Spurgeon said: "Preach you Christ, and Christ, and Christ, and Christ, and nothing else but Christ." We need sermons that are saturated with the news of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. One of the marks of a faithful ministry is preaching the Word faithfully, even when it's hard, and that leads us to Jesus, because God works through his Word and delights in exalting Christ.

- **He guarded the church carefully** – "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 ... Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears" (Acts 20:28.31). Paul understood what was at stake. He knew the immense value of the church: that it has been obtained with Christ's own blood. Christ died to save them, so he will live to protect them. He knew the church, as immensely valuable as it is, is in perpetual danger, and that's why he cared for the church's spiritual condition so carefully. He knew that the church is always in danger of believing lies and departing from the truth. That's why he guarded them so carefully, just as Nathan has taken pains to do at our church. But that's not all.

- **He lived among them honorably** – “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’” (Acts 20:33-35). People could look at Paul’s life and see that he lived with integrity. He was above board in financial matters. He worked hard. He was generous with his money.

What does a faithful ministry look like? It looks like serving God selflessly, preaching the Word faithfully, guarding the spiritual condition of others carefully, and living honorably. When you’ve found someone who does those things, you’ve found a faithful minister. That’s the record that Paul took with them, and it’s the record that Nathan and Elaine take with them as well.

Church: when you get to enjoy this kind of ministry, you have experienced a blessing from God. Don’t miss this opportunity to praise God for the faithful ministry we’ve been able to enjoy these past couple of years. Praise God that he raises up faithful pastors who love him and are willing to serve his flock faithfully. What a gift from God who loves and cares for his church.

That’s the first thing that Nathan and Elaine take with them: a good track record. But that’s not the only thing they’re taking. Like Paul, they’re taking something else with them.

They're also leaving with a mission.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 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. (Acts 20:22-24)

What a passage. Paul was leaving not because it was comfortable. He was leaving because he felt constrained by the Spirit. He knew the road ahead of him would be difficult, but it didn't matter. His goal was not to live a comfortable life but to finish the course and ministry that God had given to him, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Why are Nathan and Elaine leaving us? Not because they're going to do something easy. They're going because they have a mission: to plant a church in Baden. I don't think imprisonments await them. I hope not. But afflictions await them. Church planting involves spiritual attack, discouragement, sacrifice, and persistence, but it's worth it if only they may finish their course and the ministry they've received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

That's what Paul took with him: a good track record and a mission, and it's what Nathan and Elaine take with them too.

Two Things We're Sending

But as they leave, we're sending two things with them, the same two things that the Ephesian elders sent with Paul.

We're sending our love. "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." (Acts 20:36-37)

I like my car mechanic. But one day when I find out that the car mechanic has moved on, I probably won't cry and embrace him. That's just not the kind of relationship that we enjoy, and we never will.

But there's something deeply personal in the relationship between a pastor and his people. The relationship goes beyond the professional. Love enters the picture. It's an emotionally charged picture.

The flip side of that love is pain. When a church loves a faithful minister, that church experiences some pain when that minister leaves. That's what we're experiencing today.

But they sent something else with Paul, and we're sending it too.

We're sending our release. "And they accompanied him to the ship" (Acts 20:38). They weren't happy that Paul was leaving. They expressed their sadness. But then they went with him as he left for the next phase of his mission.

And that's what we want to do today. Nathan and Elaine, we are grateful for your ministry here. You've become precious to us. We are sad to see you go. But we also want to see today as a commissioning, a blessing, as you go to the next phase of your ministry. We want to support you in our prayers and financially. We are excited about what God is going to do in your lives. We pray that he will bless you and work through you just as he has here.

When someone serves God faithfully in a local church, something remarkable happens. When someone has a good track record – serving God selflessly, preaching the Word faithfully, guarding the spiritual condition of others carefully, and living honorably – and when they leave because God has given them a mission that calls them elsewhere, how could we not respond with love and sorrow? And how could we not release and bless such a servant as he goes?

When someone serves God faithfully and leaves, the church responds with love, sorrow, and blessing.

That's what we want to do today. Nathan and Elaine, thank you for your faithful ministry. Thank you for following God's call. We love you. We're sad you're going. But we release you and bless you, and pray for God's blessing on you and your ministry. We pray that God continues to bring himself glory through you and that many in Baden experience the transforming grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.