

Teaching Plan  
EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Date: February 4, 2018  
Lesson Title: "Delivered"  
Lesson Passage: Acts 20:22-35

ABOUT THIS LESSON

As Paul was about to complete his third missionary journey, he stopped off at Miletus to have a farewell meeting with elders from the church at Ephesus. Our Lesson Passage consists of a portion of his conversation with them. He reminds them of his faithfulness to the task of teaching the gospel during his time among them, and challenges them to follow his example, as they continue the task of shepherding the congregation and defending them against "wolves" who will prey upon their fellowship and their faithfulness to the gospel.

TEACHING/LEARNING GOALS

(1) Describe the conflicts Paul had experienced in Ephesus. (2) Explain the original meaning of the terms "elder" and "bishop."

BEGINNING THE LESSON

*Comment on what are sometimes called "since I came" stories (i.e., "Since I came, we have doubled our budget [and expenses], upped attendance, and baptized a good many people.") Then suggest that "after I left" stories might be a better measure of the effectiveness of one's ministry. If a good foundation has been laid, and the people have grown in grace and knowledge, a church will flourish after their leader is no longer on the scene. That is the real test of a church leader's work. Point out that Paul's ministry at Ephesus was facing just such a test when he spoke the words recorded in Acts 20:22-35 to leaders of the church at Ephesus as he met with them for the last time on his way back to Jerusalem.*

TEACHING PROCEDURES

1. Discuss the background of this meeting with the church leaders from Ephesus: (1) Paul's first personal visit to Ephesus had been a brief stopover on his way back to Jerusalem toward the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21). (2) His third missionary journey had brought him back to Ephesus (Acts 19:1), this time for a much longer stay of three years (Acts 20:31). (3) In Ephesus, Paul had become involved in two major conflicts. First, the opposition of certain Jews in the synagogue had made Paul withdraw, along with his band of Christian disciples, to a rented lecture hall (19:9). Second, Paul had been at the center of a riot (19:23-41) started by a number of silversmiths who had seen the preaching of the gospel as a threat to their business (making and selling silver images of the goddess Diana and her temple). (4) In 2 Cor. 1:8f. Paul says of his experience in Ephesus, "The burdens laid upon us were so great and so heavy that we gave up all hope of staying alive. We felt that the death sentence had been passed upon us."

2. *Describe the setting in which Paul delivered his farewell talk to the Ephesian elders:* (1) Coming to the end of his third missionary journey, Paul had started the voyage back to Jerusalem, hoping to arrive by Pentecost (Acts 20:16). (2) From the port city, Miletus, he sent for elders from the church at Ephesus. (The distance between Miletus and Ephesus probably was about 44.7 miles.) (3) The title "elder" probably referred to leaders of the church who were mature in their Christian experience, rather than to their age. "Elder" was a generic term, not an official title, since these same leaders are referred to as "overseers" (in Greek, this term was *episkopous*, which later would be translated as "bishops"). This implies that "elders" and "bishops" were "shepherds" who were to keep watch over "the flock," a duty referred to in v. 29.

3. *In order to impress upon them the gravity of their task, Paul recalls his own ministry in Ephesus:* (1) He had lived with the Ephesian Christians for three years (v. 31). They had watched him work and knew how he lived (v. 18), and had seen him endure the hardships imposed by Jewish opponents, as he went about his work teaching and preaching from house to house and in a public lecture hall (vv. 19-20, 25-27). (2) He had labored at his trade as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), to support himself and his associates, rather than being a burden to anyone (20:33-34). And they should follow his example in order to help the needy, in keeping with the words of Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

4. *After recalling his relationship with them in the past, Paul then told them what he was about to do:* (1) Now, compelled by obedience to the Holy Spirit, he was bound for Jerusalem, not knowing what would happen to him there, although the Spirit had warned him that prison and troubles await him there (vv. 22-23). After all, his past experience had always followed this pattern. In city after city, he had received favorable response from a few, but rejection from many. He knew what the inside of a jail looked like, and he was familiar with the cutting sting of a lash. There was no reason to believe that things would be different in Jerusalem. (2) But his safety was of much less importance than his mission, to proclaim the gospel of the grace of God (v. 24). (3) Although he did not know with certainty what the future held, he was sure of one thing--his friends in the gathering at Miletus would never see him again (v. 25). NOTE: If he had the freedom to travel again, after his visit to Jerusalem, he was determined to head straight for Rome (refer to Acts 19:21).

5. Before concluding this farewell visit, Paul left them with a warning about what lies ahead (Acts 20:28-30): (1) As guardians of the flock at Ephesus, they must be on guard against the wolves who are waiting to devour the sheep (v. 28), and they must also be wary of enemies lurking within the Christian community (v. 30). While they pretend to be friendly to the cause of Christ, they pervert the gospel in devious ways.

#### CLOSING THE LESSON

FOR DISCUSSION: There will always be "fierce wolves" (false teachers) ready to prey upon the flock. Who are the "fierce wolves" today?