

Acts 20:17-35 On Guard!

Acts 19 covers Paul's ministry in Ephesus during his second missionary journey. Acts 20, also, after noting Paul's travels in Macedonia, Greece and various Greek islands, is dominated by Paul's speech to the leaders of the church in Ephesus in verses 18-35. Scan Paul's words. He portrays church leaders as security guards? So in verse 28 he says, "*Keep watch over yourselves and all of the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.*" In verse 31 he exhorts them, "*So be on your guard!*" Indeed, in verse 28b when he calls upon them to "*be shepherds of the church of God*" he is stressing their responsibility to protect the sheep, God's people.

My oldest daughter Rebekah is married to an ambulance officer. They've been posted to Brewarrina, near Bourke, in outback Australia. A very high percentage of residents in Brewarrina have big or vicious dogs for their own protection. John and Rebekah have Jack, a German Shepherd. A few weeks back Rebekah was taking Jack for a walk. Another dog suddenly rushed at Rebekah. Jack bravely defended Rebekah, getting the better of the other dog.

Shopowners Bill and Jenny decided to get a guard dog after their shop had been broken into for the third time. Jenny saw a pet store with a sign boasting, *The Best Guard Dogs Money Can Buy*. But the only dogs in the shop she could see were tiny Pekingese. The elderly Chinese shopowner said, "Oh, don't be deceived. These dogs might look very small but they have been highly trained in the ancient art of Kung Fu." "Kung Fu? No way!" responded the disbelieving Jenny. The man led Jenny out the back of the shop and sat one of the dogs down in front of a pile of bricks. He then commanded, "Kung Fu. Bricks." With lightening speed the dog raised its tiny foreleg and brought it down upon the stack of bricks shattering them all down the middle. Buying the dog, Jenny took it home and sat it at Bill's feet. He asked, "What have you got there?" Jenny answered, "I know you'll have trouble believing me, but this tiny Pekingese is a wonderful guard dog that is highly trained in the ancient art of Kung Fu". Bill looked at the silently waiting dog and exploded, "Kung Fu. My foot!"

Would you like such a dog to stop people stealing church equipment? Your church needs security guards to protect something far more precious than the building and its meagre assets. Paul says to the Ephesian elders (v28): "*Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood*". Our God, the Lord Jesus Christ, paid the supreme price, shedding his own blood for the church of God. You are incalculably precious. This church needs to be more heavily guarded than Fort Knox, more protected than the Crown Jewels, for you are the jewel in the crown of King Jesus.

The key to a secure church environment is the calibre of its security guards, its leaders. Paul presents himself as an exemplary sentinel. In verse 26 Paul states: "*Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men*". Do you recognize the background to these words? Back in Ezekiel 33 God tells the prophet Ezekiel that he has made him a watchman, that is, a sentry or sentinel for Israel. God tells Ezekiel that if people die because Ezekiel fails to pass on God's warning then Ezekiel will be held responsible for such deaths. But if people still die after Ezekiel faithfully passes on a warning from God then he will be innocent of their blood:

7 "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. 8 When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for [a] his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. 9 But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself. (Ezekiel 33:1-9)

Paul hears what God says to Ezekiel and thinks, "I stand in Ezekiel's shoes". When he urges church leaders to be sentinels he is saying to them, "You stand in Ezekiel's shoes". God holds Christian leaders accountable for whether people live or die.

In the movie *Sentinel* Michael Douglas plays Pete Garrison, one of the US President's elite guard. Early in the movie the US President gets out of his car and a large crowd is milling around. Pete Garrison scans the crowd. He sees a man with a hand inside his blazer. Immediately, he alerts secret service agents. They approach the man and ensure he is not carrying a weapon. A reliable informer tells Pete there is a mole in the secret service and a plot to assassinate the President. Again Pete gives due warning and extra measures are taken to protect the President.

Many terrorists would love to assassinate the US President. But the US President is actually pretty low down on Satan's hit list. At the top of his hit list is the church of God, you! Paul acts as a faithful sentinel when he warns the Ephesian church of the threats that lie ahead, as he does in verse 29:

"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from among your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!"

Some of you have achieved academic or business success. Some of you have good relational skills. You must strip away the deceptive layers of self-confidence and see yourself as vulnerable sheep - people that desperately need protection. There are people out there who object to your commitment to biblical truth. They would love to persuade you to be more tolerant, more enlightened, more relevant at the cost of biblical faithfulness. But just as a mole in the secret service is highly dangerous so too church communities are particularly vulnerable to attacks from within.

In 1936, during the Spanish Civil War, a Nationalist general named Emilio Mola gave a radio address. Four of his army columns were moving on Madrid. But the general claimed too that he had a "fifth column", that is, his militant supporters already living in Madrid, all intent on undermining the Republican government from within. The sentinels of a church must carefully guard against the development of a fifth column. I hope your church has no faction of disgruntled church members. Make sure your church has good ways of dealing with complaints, grievances and relational tensions.

Paul begins his address, presenting himself as an exemplary sentinel:

"You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house" (vv18-20).

Flick forward to verse 31: "*Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears*". For 3 years Paul faithfully relayed God's warnings to them. He was a model sentinel.

By contrast sentinel Pete Garrison's affair with the First Lady facilitates the plot to assassinate the President. Moral failure is one of the main avenues our enemy uses to set his wolves upon the flock of God. In v28 Paul urges Christian leaders: "*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*". Leaders, don't give our enemy a foothold. If your own life is not in order then you are a danger to God's people. You must have a strong devotional life. You must keep

yourself away from pornography. You must relate properly to your spouse and children. Keep watch over yourself.

At the 2006 Embers Church Revitalisation conference in Melbourne the main speaker, Harry Reeder, told us he has four people who keep him accountable. He might be staying in a hotel. The phone rings and one of these four asks, "Who is in the hotel room with you?" "What channels on the TV have you been watching?" I personally need people to keep me in on my spiritual toes. One friend I once shared housing with regularly challenged me by asking, "What is the Lord laying on your heart?" Keep watch over yourself - an exhortation that clearly applies to every member of the church and not just to leaders.

Why was Paul such an exemplary sentinel? Because of his value system. We've seen the immense value Paul placed on the church, God's people, as those purchased with the blood of Christ. The leaders of the Ephesian church had no doubt that Paul loved them. You can see this from the way they acted after Paul finished his speech:

When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship" (vv36-38).

When I was down in Melbourne I had the pleasure of spending time at Dandenong Presbyterian church with the minister there, John Rickard. By the age of 22 John had a black belt, second Dan, in Karate and a black belt in Chinese boxing. However, it is not John's martial arts skills that make him a good guardian of the church there, but his love for the people in his church. Our churches need good guardians and the best guardians for the flock are not efficient, well organized people, not successful people, not clever people but people who love God's people and treat them, with all their faults, as a blood-bought people, a people of immense value.

As I said before it is Paul's value system that makes him such an exemplary sentinel. This comes out in verses 33-35:

"I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. 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'".

Our churches need good guardians who will not just devote their time to those who have potential for effective ministry, but who care for the weak. The mark of a good leader is how he or she treats those who have little potential for changing the future or making a difference. A good leader does not overlook them and their needs. A good leader cares for such people and works hard to see that their needs are met, though it must be recognized that Paul never allowed himself to become preoccupied with just meeting human needs.

But there is something else that must be said about the value system that made Paul such an exemplary sentinel. We come now to one of Paul's key statements in our passage:

"However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace" (v24).

Paul knows that for him the sands of time are sinking. He senses he eventually he will be executed, hence his next statement in verse 25: "Now I know that none of you

among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again." But you can see central to Paul's value system is a sense of duty, a determination to be faithfully discharge his duties to the very end. At the end of the movie *The Sentinel*, in predictable Hollywood style, Pete Garrison takes a bullet as he successfully defends the President against attack. Paul was not living in movie world, but in the real world. Paul knew that his job, his task would one day cost him not just a red badge of courage, a bullet wound, but his very life.

Will you lay down your life for the gospel of God's grace? For Paul the gospel is worth his life. He entrusts this same message of grace to church leaders: *"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"* (v32). A great deal of Paul's speech reveals profound meditation on Ezekiel 33-36. He identifies himself with the watchman of Ezekiel 33. Ezekiel 34 portrays God's people as the flock of God and their leaders as shepherds - precisely what Paul also does. Ezekiel 34 promises God will gather his scattered sheep and Paul exhorts church leaders to "be shepherds of the gathering of God" for the word *ekklesia* ("church") means "gathering". Now the church or "gathering of God" is that which was bought with Christ's blood. So "the church of God" is not God's people meeting together, but the entire community God has gathered from the nations. In Ezekiel 34 God also promises to protect his people from wild animals. Paul warns church leaders that they protect the flock from savage wolves. In Ezekiel 36 God further promises to not only gather his people from the nations but to effect rebuilding and enable his people to enjoy their inheritance in the land he has given them. Note now that it is the gospel of God's grace which God uses to build up his people and given them their inheritance.

The more God's people are built up the more secure the church environment becomes and the more God's people are prepared for entrance into the ultimate secure environment, their promised inheritance. There is no better way that leaders can guard the flock than by ensuring that every church member has a good understanding of gospel truth and, with it, a sound understanding of the depths of God's grace.

Paul again is the exemplary sentinel in this respect. In verse 20 he declares:

"You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks (Greek-speaking Gentiles) that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."

Paul is not content with public communication of God's word. He goes "from house to house". Gosford PC does not merely have a preacher, but a group of trained elders. We need leaders committed to visiting God's people and spending time reading the Bible with them and discussing it with them. Raise the percentage of church members in home-based Bible study groups. Ensure every member understands the Scriptures. Don't just assume they do because they regularly come to church on Sunday.

Today, we talk about short attention spans and the need for creative teaching methods. Do your best to communicate God's truth in engaging and arresting ways. But, as a man on the move, Paul didn't have time to prepare PowerPoint presentations or surf the internet for jokes and quotes. Having only one opportunity while in Troas Paul decided to talk until they dropped, literally, for Eutychus fell asleep and dropped from of a third storey window, evidently to his death. You might want to encourage your pastor to be more longwinded in his sermons to allow for the possibility that he

may be called on to do something exciting, like raising the dead. The word disciple means "learner" and one essential aspect of our discipleship is that we must learn to be good listeners, even if the teaching is not as dynamic as we would like. We need to struggle with tiredness and even a sense of boredom and ask the Lord to give us the heart of learners. If you have a problem concentrating then make a practice of taking notes.

Again in verse 27 Paul declares, "*For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God*". Have a plan for exposing God's people to all of the Scriptures over a period of time, and not just favourite portions. Remember "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*". If you neglect portions of God's word then you can't thoroughly equip people for every good work intended by our God. Accept personal responsibility for getting a comprehensive and thorough knowledge of God's Word. Use cassettes, DVDs, videos. Do correspondence courses. Take notes when sermons are preached. Ask questions. Be involved in a Bible study group or start one in your own home. Have family devotions.

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock". Be exemplary sentinels. Amen.