

Acts 20

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[0 : 00] I want us this morning just to use in a sense chapter 20 and that particular portion of chapter 20 that we read as a bit of background.

And as I want us to use that, I also perhaps want us to use our own minds. But if there is a verse of Scripture that perhaps seeks to encapsulate all that's going on, there are many things going on in that particular portion of Scripture in chapter 20 where Paul invites the elders of the church at Ephesus to meet him.

A very moving passage of Scripture. But amongst the various things, many things that's going on, these words in verse 27 spoken by Paul reminds us of this truth.

He said, I have not shunned to declare to you the whole a counsel of God. Paul had been with the Ephesian people for a reasonably lengthy period of time.

And in that period of time, as he says earlier, never ceased to preach repentance towards God in verse 21 and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 28] And in so doing, as he preached to them, developed through that preaching their understanding of the things of God.

And as Paul prepares to take his leave of them in a very emotional farewell, that in many respects perhaps gives Paul comfort.

That he can leave them saying that he is innocent of the blood of all men because he has not ceased to declare to them the whole a counsel of God.

And very often, as I think about that great legacy with which Paul left Ephesus, I often wonder if that is something that all of us could say as we journey through our own lives, particularly those of us this morning who profess to be Christians.

Whether in the outworking of our Christian experience and our interacting with our peoples, whether in the context of congregation or in the workplace or amongst our friends and our families and colleagues, we too have sought by word and by example to show forth the gospel, the amazing grace of God that has touched our lives and made a difference in them.

[3 : 03] I wonder if we are good at sharing what God has done with us and for us to all that we come in contact with.

Some are better at it, we might say, than others, but all of us, I believe, as Christian people, should be challenged to be prepared to, as it were, explain what the Christian faith means.

What it means to our world and what it means to you and me personally. And when we think about that and think about possible ways we might answer that, I want to suggest to you this morning several perhaps key characteristics that will inevitably or should inevitably be part of every Christian witness, of every opportunity that we take to give a reason for the hope that is within us.

And I think it's true whether we're thinking about ourselves or thinking about Paul, that these characteristics would have been true.

And when Paul was undoubtedly thinking back over the period of time he spent with the Ephesians, he too is thinking of how he broke down the message of God's Word.

[4 : 37] How he explained it. How he taught it. And so I want to suggest that perhaps the first thing that's in Paul's mind here when he says, I'm not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.

He has in mind what I think the Christian faith does for all of us. And that is that it educates us. It brings us face to face with some of the big issues that confront all of us in our lives.

To which we need education. The world in which we live in. The world around us. Is a world that by its very nature challenges us to ask the question, where does it come from?

When I go north and there's not the same volume of lights from streetlights and so on. Particularly in an autumn winter's evening in the northeast.

And go out with a dog. And it's one of those crisp, frosty, autumn winter's evenings. It is inevitable that your eyes will go up.

[5 : 53] And you'll look around. Because above you is glimmering a vast, vast sky full of light.

And full of so much that draws the questions out of us. Three weeks ago I was at Crossing Sky.

And coming back on this Sunday evening, it was one of those memorable evenings that's better in the mind than it is through the lens of a camera. But such was the beauty of that evening coming home.

The different hues of colors on the mountains. The calmness of the water around. It was almost begging you to pull into every lay-by and just stop and take it in.

The world that we see and we attempt to understand that's out there. And the world that's all around us is a world that is forever begging the question.

[6 : 54] Where from? How? Where to? And there are so many explanations that we're given in our lifetimes.

So many theories. Where ultimately does our minds and our hearts find real education about what is out there and what is around us?

It is surely back to the Scriptures. Which doesn't give us all the formula, DNA and all the rest of it.

But it gives us this fundamental statement, In the beginning, God. And it's almost as if there's sufficient in that to convince the mind that that's all we need.

Because we can then take the heavens that are above us. And we can hear the affirmation of the psalmist that tells us, The heavens declares the glory of God.

[7 : 56] And so on. We can in our minds traverse to Paul's letter to the Romans. And remind ourselves, like he sought to remind them, That there is sufficient even in the very things that are made, To convince us that God is.

And so the Christian faith, As we confront it, educates us. And Paul is aware that that is part of the wonderful purpose that he spent amongst the Ephesians.

Educating them about the God who is the creator of the heavens and the earth. The very God through whom each of us lives and moves, And has our very existence in.

But it's not just about the world up there or out there and around us that it educates us with. Or concerning. It educates us about ourselves.

Nothing speaks more pertinently to who I am and what I am than this book. And I dare say every one of us as Christians will say the same thing.

[9 : 11] How many times have we in our lives wondered why we do certain things? Why we can be so ugly as people sometimes?

Why we can be so vindictive? Why we can be so full of hate? Why we can be so clinical? Why we can be so violent?

Why we can be so violent? Why we can be so violent? Why we can be so violent? When we confront the truth of God's word as it is, And as it confronts man and who man is, It is indeed a sobering truth to face up to.

Because it talks to us, it educates us about ourselves as nothing else does. It squares me to the truth that my heart is deceitful and desperately wicked.

It brings me to the place where I can understand why the good that I so often should do, I don't do. You find the same.

[10 : 22] You find the same. That when we come face to face with the riches that is God's Word to us, we come face to face with an education, with a textbook that teaches us in a way that nothing else does.

But it not only educates us, it brings us also into an experience of enlightenment, we can say.

It illuminates a darkened mind. When Paul was writing to the Ephesians, I think he had this in mind as well. Because as Paul thought about the wonder of God's incredible grace, as Paul pondered what the grace of God was and what it did for men and women, he comes to a place in chapter 2 where he says this, You, he says, he made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the Prince of the power of the air, the Spirit, who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature the children of wrath just as the others.

But God, who is rich in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses and sins, made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved, he says.

And that is what the Christian faith does for all of us. For all of us who profess faith in church this morning, we can all say there was that period of education in our lives, but there was also a moment in our experience where it was more than education.

[12 : 39] The darkness of our minds was opened. And the light of the truth and of the glory of God shone in and dispelled the darkness. Brought me to a place where face to face, I not only had to face up to what I was, a sinner, but I was able to see that there was a Savior gifted by God to me.

And you too. And that's a wonderful thing to have to share to a world still as it was then, dead in trespass and sin.

To a world inhabited by all too many people without God and without hope. Do you educate your people?

Do you educate them in such a way, whether in church or in home or amongst family, in such a way that they see Jesus?

The gift of God's love to the world through whom all can be redeemed. But the Christian faith does more than just educate and enlighten.

[14 : 02] It enriches us. It makes us a people we weren't once. It brings something into our lives that we could never imagine.

And Paul is one of the great examples of this enrichment. From the moment Paul's, as it were, the scales are taken off Paul's darkened eyes.

Paul lives his life as a fledgling, we might say, apostle, maturing Christian, coming through to these closing years of his life.

And from the beginning of grace touching him to the moment he lays down his life, Paul never ever forgot what God had done for him in his life.

You remember how he writes as an older man to Timothy. And it is as if in the midst of all the practicalities of exhorting this young man who's going to take up the mantle in Ephesus.

[15 : 11] It's as if his mind is drawn back down through the years to the moment grace touched him. And it is as if again he's lost in wonder.

And all he can say to Timothy, but I obtained mercy. I was this violent, insolent man.

I was this man who brought trembling to the Christian church. I was even the chiefest of sinners, but I obtained mercy.

And Paul is almost reveling in the wonder of what grace has done for him. So much so that he's almost saying to Timothy, I am this trophy of grace that you must never forget, and you must take into your own ministry, and you must lift the grace of God up before men, because what God did for me, he can do for others through you.

Isn't that again why scriptures such as, if any man is in Christ Jesus, he is a new creation, are so precious.

[16 : 24] Can you not bear testimony to that this morning? Not only has the faith educated you and enlightened you, it has enriched your life in a way that nothing else ever did.

But not only can we say that, I think also we can say that the Christian faith enables us. When Paul is saying his farewell to the Ephesians, Paul is well aware as he has been throughout all his life that the Christian path is not an easy road.

What lies ahead of me are trials and imprisonments, tribulations, none of which are going to be easy. He even reminds us that there are going to be tears along the way.

And for the whole of Paul's Christian experience, there has been many moments like that. How did he survive? How can he, as he says to the Ephesians, look forward to that future that is in Christ Jesus?

How is it he can say, as he says in Acts, press on, as it were, towards the prize? It is undoubtedly in Paul's mind, possible.

[18 : 08] It's possible because now he has someone within him, someone for him, who will keep him.

You know, we live in an age, perhaps as never before, where we are always trying to find ways of doing things, of being enabled or empowered, perhaps is the buzzword of our time, being empowered to do things.

Where is the greatest empowerment found? Where is it found when your life and mine is falling apart?

Perhaps to date, that has never been your experience. But the reality of human life is that there are days like that, periods like that, where life falls apart.

Where getting up in the morning is a real struggle. Facing people is something not too attractive. Comes about in such a variety of ways.

[19 : 26] It may be that you go into work tomorrow, or you went into work last Monday and you're told, Friday, clear the desk. You've been to the doctor's surgery and the results are back.

You've come home and your wife or your husband has told you it's finished. The years of marriage are gone. I'm leaving. It may be children that tax you and breaks your heart.

It may be age that is increasingly catching up with you and beginning to disable and make life a real struggle. It may be death itself.

Because death comes. Verement is a reality. And all of these experiences are tough. And a thousand more besides.

How do we survive the realities and the rigors of human existence? How do we? Just bite our bottom lip and hope that it will all pass away?

[20 : 46] Hope that social security will allow us to survive or social workers or counselors will get us by? Why? My friends, we can point to one who is eminently more sufficient than all of these things.

Good and all as each and every agency and individual is. We can point men and women to the one that has been our sucker, our strength in our time of need.

we can point them as Paul is undoubtedly thinking to the one whose grace is sufficient for every time of need.

And when you think about Paul, because he's human, he was human, he had the day-to-day rigors as you and I have them, the day-to-day strains of life.

He also had these added strains that he was in a position of eminent influence and power in church.

[21 : 59] And that brought with it its own stresses, its own strains and responsibilities. So there wasn't just the ordinary pressures in Paul's life, there was the extraordinary pressures.

And yet Paul is able to say not only is the grace of God sufficient, but Paul is able to say I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

How many of you as Christians in church this morning can bear testimony to the same wonderful truth? In the days when life was downright tough, in the days when there was no sun in the sky above you, but only dark clouds, you bear testimony to the same same power as Paul bore testimony to.

hitherto the Lord has helped us. Isn't that the reality of your Christian experience?

And finally, I think something else that the Christian faith does educates us, enlightens our darkened minds, enriches our lives through grace, empowers our lives in a way that sometimes we struggle to fully appreciate.

[23 : 38] faith. But the Christian faith, the Christian life also allows us to endure to the end. It allows us to look forward with hope.

There was a time when we lived without God and without hope. But that has changed. That is now the reality through grace of hope.

hope. But what is that Christian hope of yours and mine? It's a hope that not only takes us, as it were, to the three score and ten if we're spared them, it is a hope that pushes beyond the valley of the shadow of death to that place that the scriptures speak of as heaven.

sin. And the Christian faith keeps one motivated to press on, knowing that even death in all its humbleness and with all its sting is not the end.

Because we hear constantly in the face of death the words of Jesus, I am the resurrection and the life. He that lives and believes in me will never die.

[24 : 55] That's wonderful. Because it's challenging you and me to look on and look forward and look beyond time to eternity.

To that place where we will see him as he really is and not another. In the lion and the witch and the wardrobe, there's that lovely little bit.

where it talks about the present, making contrast to that which is eternal. And goes along the line something like this, that all that is true of the present is but as the title and cover and the title page.

What comes and what will be is an endless story, an ongoing story in which every chapter gets better than the one before.

That's what the Christian faith brings to your life and mine. Not just something for the here and now, but something magnificent and glorious for what lies ahead.

[26 : 09] Do you have that this morning, my friends? Has the Christian faith done that for your soul in all its mystery and majesty?

Has it educated you? Has it enlightened you? Enriched you? Empowered you?

And does it keep you pressing on? May God allow it to be so and to do so. And may God allow you and me never to be ashamed of telling that story and these realities where we have opportunity to do so.

Because our world is a world that is in all too many places here in Scotland without God and without hope. What a wonderful privilege to be able to share that truth, these experiences to such a needy place.

Paul was thrilled with the privilege that was his. I hope you'll be the same as you live the Christian life, as you walk the Christian life, as you talk the Christian experience.

[27 : 36] Thank you. four great. Ooh, yeah.