

## **Closing message NHBFB 4/5/20 – Paul’s farewell Acts 20**

As I thought about my final message at New Hope as a gathered community (-a message had hoped I could deliver in person on the 5<sup>th</sup>), I was drawn to Acts 20 and the story of Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders. There are many similarities in context for Paul and the elders and me and you all at New Hope. So let’s look at these closely together and see what God has to say to us in this time of farewell, face to face.

There is a lot of emotion in the relationship between Paul and the Ephesian Christians. In Paul’s 3 ½ years among them he went house to house teaching them, admonished them with tears day and night, tells them how special they are in his letter to them, and we see their weeping as they part. He shepherded his new converts well and there was evident love and respect on both sides. So I want to start with the pain of such farewells..

### **The importance of handling grief and farewells collaboratively**

I believe it is important that we are open about our grief, beloved. Life will be filled with losses and they affect us emotionally and spiritually and even physically. But, we have the promises of God. When Jesus said he was sending the Holy Spirit to be with us forever, He called him our Comforter, our Paraclete, the one who comes alongside us and advocates for us. Jesus has also given us a family in Him – brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers in the faith with whom we can share our grief. As we do, they can also help carry our load and be God’s presence of love and compassion and comfort.

And this is critical now for us at New Hope. I realize that Keith’s and my decision to move to Florida was unexpected and majorly disruptive to everyone, and yet even in the last weeks we could have had together, the covid-19 virus hit and we had to cancel church services for all these weeks as well as all the one-on-one times I was so looking forward to as good closure. Similarly, in the closing of school, many of you did not have time to say a good goodbye to others. That has been painful. Our Sam was suddenly called back to Canada before those borders closed so he didn’t get a chance to even say goodbye. The timing felt very premature, but it was God’s covering; he made it home only 3 days before the borders did close. So, he is grieving those losses in Canada, as so many of us are here in the States and among our members who are scattered far and wide in the world. There will no longer be our house and the family of faith to come back to. (Now you know we are advocating for as many as possible to come to Orlando and see us or work there etc. And I hope you will do that. But I know it is not the same.) In fact, in our move to Florida this is a double loss because we don’t yet have a new family of faith to journey with – brothers and sisters in Jesus whom we can pray with, weep with, celebrate with and do ministry with. Many of you who are transitioning to a new school or situation face that similar double loss.

So, in this context, I am asking God for a heart fixed on Him, and not on the circumstances and the grief. Instead, I have purposely tried to recall all the things God did these 10 years at New Hope when we did journey together, face to face, hand in hand and on our knees together. Lots of times, I have included the promises or songs God brings to mind as His comfort or direction to Shepherds Daughters. But last Saturday, when Brad came to say goodbye and take some furniture for his house, he asked me if I would keep sending out messages of hope now that the church is closed. The answer in my heart was yes, absolutely but now in a new forum. Since I want to share what God has given for Shepherds Daughters with so many dear men who are part of our “family,” I am going to broaden that mailing list! I sent out a request for suggestions on an inclusive name and got wonderful responses, like “His scattered flock,” “The Shepherd’s flock,” “Hungry Ones,” “Shepherd’s sons and daughters.” We will make that choice this week. (I am leaning toward His Scattered Flock because it follows the Biblical theme of the Apostle Peter as He addressed “God’s elect, . . . scattered . . . chosen by God the Father through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood (I Peter 1:1-2), I love the global implications of scattered, since we are also a community of believers who are scattered around the world and who seek to live in obedience to Christ for His work in the world.

My desire is that through such a forum like His scattered Flock, we can share through the internet our griefs and sorrows and bring comfort and hope to one another. Paul did that after he left the Ephesian elders in the letters he wrote from Rome and between his imprisonments in Rome. Sharing grief is point one.

### **Point two: “I have shown you” (Acts 20:35)**

Then Paul summarized his ministry among them – teaching in public and going from house to house, admonishing them with tears day and night to follow the Lord, working with his hands to supply his own needs and the needs of his companions. Again and again he says, “I have shown you.” V.35. May you always have leaders who will model Christ’s life for you and then may you be that kind of leader for others. A leader whose heart and life focus become a guiding pattern and encouragement for those whom he or she leads. I’m reminded of the chorus both Keith and I want sung at our funerals:

“Oh may those who come behind us find us faithful, may the fire of our devotion light their way.

May the footprints that we leave lead them to believe and the life we live inspire them to obey.

Oh, may those who come behind us find us faithful.” (words and music by Jon Mohr)

Indeed, Lord, may it be so for each one of us

### **An admonition and a promise**

Finally, Paul closes his farewell with an admonition and a promise that I want to leave with you as well. Hear v. 28 and 32 in two different translations:

NLT: <sup>28</sup> “So guard yourselves and God’s people. Feed and shepherd God’s flock—his church, purchased with his own blood<sup>[a]</sup>—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>29</sup> I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup> Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. <sup>31</sup> Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you...<sup>32</sup> “And now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself.

The Message put the admonition and a promise this way: <sup>28</sup> “Now it’s up to you. Be on your toes—both for yourselves and your congregation of sheep. The Holy Spirit has put you in charge of these people—God’s people they are—to guard and protect them. God himself thought they were worth dying for. <sup>29-31</sup> “I know that as soon as I’m gone, vicious wolves are going to show up and rip into this flock, men from your very own ranks twisting words so as to seduce disciples into following them instead of Jesus. So stay awake and keep up your guard. Remember those three years I kept at it with you, never letting up, pouring my heart out with you, one after another. <sup>32</sup> “Now I’m turning you over to God, our marvelous God whose gracious Word can make you into what he wants you to be and give you everything you could possibly need in this community of holy friends.

First, guard ourselves. You can’t be all God wants you to be for others if you don’t daily nourish your own life in the Word, in His presence, through obedience to the Spirit’s leading. We must walk with God, beloved – ending each night with confession of sin and thanksgiving for what God did that day and opening each morning with praise and a commitment to follow the Lord wholeheartedly. “Keep watch over your own life.”

The Apostle Peter echoes a similar admonition when he writes to “God’s elect scattered throughout Asia Minor:” (1 Peter 1:2) “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that fellow Christians around the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” (1 Pet. 5:8-9). Keeping watch over your life means being alert to Satan’s lies and accusations and discouragements, refusing to let them have validity in your mind and casting them out with the authority of Jesus’ name and blood. That’s how you can successfully live in Jesus’ victory.

Second, be shepherds of those God puts in your care and in your path. Tend to their wounds, listen to their stories, watch over their lives, help them find the nurture and growth they need, protect them from the evil one. And do this shepherding with the ever-present reality that Jesus died to create a church where He rules and in which He is cherished and obeyed. Ezekiel 34:15-16 has a beautiful description of this shepherding role looks like: <sup>15</sup> *I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign LORD.* <sup>16</sup> *I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!* Be a shepherd to those around you. Love them, go after them when they stray, nurture them, weep for them, fight for them, bring them into God's peace

And, third, do it all in the strength and grace that God alone supplies. V. 32: *It is God, our marvelous God whose gracious Word can make them (and you) into what he wants you to be and give you everything you could possibly need in this community of holy friends.* It is God we all entrust ourselves to. It is God who prays for you. It is God who is your deliverer and healer, your source of grace and peace and endless mercy. It is God, whom we know in Jesus Christ, who will give you everything you need to be His masterpiece, bringing great fruit throughout eternity through the works he leads you to do in His name and by His power. It is all the Lord.

### **Paul's future beyond the farewell**

It seems that Paul was imprisoned and then freed – When he was acquitted at Rome, he went to Macedonia and Asia Minor, perhaps to Spain and other parts of Asia in AD 64-65. In the summer of 66 he writes I Timothy from Macedonia, then writes Titus from Neapolis. He is imprisoned again in Rome in 67 where he writes 2 Timothy in the spring. Acts 28 tells of his ministry in Rome. He is finally executed in the summer of AD 68.

Paul knew he would likely die in Rome but he clearly bought up every opportunity he had in and out of prison and lived to fulfill his calling from the Lord. Outside the gospels and Acts, the New Testament is made up predominantly of Paul's letters to the churches he planted. It is clear that he carried their welfare in his heart and was committed to prayer and pouring everything he had into them.

### **Our journey together**

Even though New Hope as a gathered physical community is closing, I feel for each one who has been part of this church as Paul and Peter both did for their converts. I carry each one in my heart and want to help you all press on to fulfill your high calling in Christ Jesus.

For my part, to continue to fulfill my pastoring role among you, I will send out the daily meditation to His Scattered flock and will post a sermon/meditation once a month. It is such a blessing for me to work on these sermons, so this will be for my own good as well as the good of all those who receive them. Our physical church may be closed, but we will still remain as a family in faith journeying together. .

God bless you, and give you His multiplied grace and peace in all that is ahead. I am eternally grateful for how you each have blessed Keith and I.

With much love and continued prayers, always

Dr. Mary Lou.