

Saved from Wolves

Acts 20:28-32 (NIV)

²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. ³² "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."

As we jump back into the book of Acts today, we are now in the ministry of Paul where he decided it was time for him to go back to Jerusalem after another of his missionary journeys. But Paul knew that a trip to Jerusalem may mean that he would never see some of the people that he had brought Christ to, people like the Ephesian Christians. So, he called the elders of the Ephesian congregation to meet him at a nearby coastal city called Miletus. There, Paul gives them their charge, their direction for the Church: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." (verse 28)

Be shepherds of the church of God. What do shepherds do? The job of a shepherd can be summarized nicely in three words: lead, feed, and guard. The shepherd leads his sheep to where they must go. He leads them away from ditches and cliffs and uneven ground that could cause injury. He leads by going out in front of the sheep and calls them with his voice to follow him. Part of the leading, of course, is to direct the sheep to places to eat, to green pastures and quiet waters. In places like Israel, the Middle East, a desert climate, it's not always easy to find these places to eat and drink. The shepherd has to very carefully and purposefully lead the sheep to any patches of grass that they can eat and make sure that there is a water source plentiful enough for all the sheep. Along the way, there will also be dangers from wild animals. So, the shepherd must also defend the flock, snatch sheep from the jaws of predators. He uses a rod and a staff, something to beat the predators away and protect the sheep from death.

Paul had shepherded the Ephesian Christians for three years. He had led them with his voice to know Jesus Christ and him crucified and risen from the dead as their substitute, their righteousness before God. He preached to them concerning Jesus, proclaiming his kingdom. He fed them with God's Word daily in a lecture hall, teaching them the whole will of God, how God came for sinners, how he lived perfectly under the law for them, in place of them, died for them, and then rose from the dead, and that by doing so God had taken away their sins, gifted them his perfection, and gave them the inheritance of heaven.

Paul also had guarded them. He said, "Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears." (verse 31) The wolves, the predators, were looking to devour the Ephesian Christians. There were some Jews who not only refused to believe what Paul was preaching, but they publicly maligned the Way, hurled insults at the Christians, decried this faith to anyone who would listen. There were the makers of idols, people who literally built statues and made silver shrines to Artemis, a fertility goddess worshiped throughout Asia (not the same as the Greco-Roman goddess). They made their living selling these idols. When people stopped believing in this false god, they started losing their income, their livelihood. They rioted against the Christians. Thankfully this time, law and order prevailed, but the wolves were all around this Christian flock at Ephesus.

Paul now told these Ephesian elders that it was their turn to lead, feed, and guard the flock entrusted to them, the church of God bought by the blood of the Good Shepherd, Jesus. The guarding factor was emphasized even more so when Paul told them, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them." (verses 29-30)

Savage wolves are coming. When I hear these words, I think of a very specific wolf, a character in the 1984 movie, "The NeverEnding Story." I thought about showing you all a picture, but then I remembered that it was an image that haunted my nightmares for years, a reoccurring nightmare where this wolf of all black fur with sharp, protruding fangs and glowing green eyes would sneak into my room while it was pitch black. I would try to hide, but it would always find me. I always woke up right as it pounced. The savage wolves that Paul was talking weren't actual wolves, but they are people looking to destroy Christians, people who hold a gun to a Christian's head telling them that if they don't reject their faith right now that they will die. These wolves are people who actively try to snuff out Christianity, keep it out of their country, burn Bibles and imprison and beat Christians. We probably experience more the taunting wolves who mock our faith, go out of their way to laugh at how ridiculous this concept of God is, who call it a fairy tale or a crutch for the weak, a rationale for the dimwitted. They are like those Jews who publicly maligned the Way in Paul's day.

However, evil often appears much friendlier at first, like a wolf in sheep's clothing. Paul warned about savage wolves coming from their own number, people who went to church with them, who were baptized, who ate meals with them. He said that these savage wolves would rise up from within the Church and distort the Good Shepherd's voice, God's Word, put their own spin on it, change the message so that it benefited them whether it be gaining popularity or having people support them financially based on the message they preached. And, yes, even we are tempted to distort the truth, to twist the facts, to leave out certain details, in order to paint us in a better light, to make us look like the hero to receive praise or even to look like the victim to receive sympathy. Do we distort God's commands to allow our consciences more wiggle room, that it's okay to hold a grudge even though we are told to forgive as Christ forgave us or that it's okay to do that one sin because I will ask for forgiveness afterwards? Are we one of these wolves that we are supposed to be on our guard against?

Because of sin, yes, there is some wolf in all of us, a sinful nature that wants to distort the truth for our own benefit and personal gain. Who will save us from ourselves? Jesus, the Good Shepherd sends the Holy Spirit to appoint shepherds under him to lead, feed, and guard his flock here on earth. He sent the Holy Spirit to appoint people like Paul, like these Ephesian elders, like your pastor for these very tasks. Did you know that the title "pastor" means "shepherd"?

By the grace of the Good Shepherd, I work to lead, feed, and guide you as God's flock. Like the Good Shepherd, I use my voice to do that. I feed you by proclaiming God's Word to you at our church services. I lead you in God's path of righteousness by studying God's Word with you in Bible studies. Our Sunday School teachers and Director do the same for our little lambs. We lead you to God's Word. We lead you through God's Word. By doing so, the Holy Spirit feeds your faith and trust in him by the word of his grace, all the marvelous things he does for you day in and day out as our Good Shepherd. The Holy Spirit builds you up using the word of God's grace, how he has laid down his life for you, shed his blood to buy you from sin, death, and the devil, and then rose again to continue leading, feeding, and guarding us. Through the voice of the Good Shepherd, I warn you of false teachers, of savage wolves who wish to destroy your faith, and those who wish to distort the truth.

But I have to admit that I am not always there to guard you against these things. I am finite. My time and energy is limited. My knowledge is limited. My courage is limited. I ask myself if I am the hired hand that Jesus spoke of. Do I run away from the danger and leave you unprotected? If I have failed you in any of these ways, forgive me. Forgive me because I am a sheep too, one who needs the Good Shepherd just as much as everyone else, one who needs to be saved the wolves around us and in me, just like you do.

Paul knew that he could not always guard the Ephesian flock of God from the savage wolves. He even knew that the elders, those whom the Holy Spirit made overseers of the flock of God, could not always guard the flock, the church of God. This is why Paul said, "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." (verse 32) Paul committed the Ephesian elders, those pastors, to God and to the word of his grace. He committed them to the Good Shepherd, the Shepherd who brought us into his fold with his own blood, who made us sheep instead of wolves, the Shepherd who does not fail and does not flee, the Shepherd who never takes a break from watching over us, leading us, feeding us, and guarding us.

Since I will not always be able to guard you against those wolves of this world, it is to the Good Shepherd, to Jesus Christ, to God himself, that I commit you as well as myself. Only he can keep you and me safe. Only he can build you and me up. Only he can give you and me an inheritance among all those who are sanctified, among all the flock that has been bought by his blood.

Can you help me in this charge in shepherding the Church of God? How can you stay closer to the Shepherd? How can you spend more time being led, fed, and guarded by his voice? Is that by making a point to come to every worship service you can? Is that by attending Bible study and Sunday School? Is that by reading the Bible at home, praying for the church, praying for this flock? The more we are led, fed, and guarded by the Good Shepherd's voice, the closer we are to him. The closer we are to the shepherd, the safer we are from the wolves.

When I stand up here before you, I commit myself to doing nothing more and nothing less than for you to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, that you hear the word of his grace. The Good Shepherd will keep you safe from all the wolves – the ones outside the flock and the ones in the flock and even ourselves. The Good Shepherd and the word of his grace makes us a part of his flock, bought by his blood. The Good Shepherd will keep you safe. Listen to his voice to be led, fed, and guarded throughout this life. Amen.