

“Life in the Pasture: The Wolves”
Acts 20:13-38

FCF: Unawareness of the danger of wolves

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Because wolves are sure to come in among the flock,
(anchor) we must keep watch for them.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

The technology at the disposal of our military forces is really an awesome thing – not only in its raw power and speed but in the ability to avoid detection as well. I’m thinking in particular of “stealth technology” – fighters, bombers, missiles, even ships with the ability to elude enemy tracking systems. The idea is to design certain features, use certain materials, mask certain signals such that the “signature” of the aircraft is hidden or disguised so as to allow it to sneak in undetected. So much so that the only “detection” comes once the bombs have been dropped and the targets taken out.

All of which is really quite interesting and wonderfully comforting – if you’re on this side of things. Not so much if you’re on the receiving end of such technology. To have an enemy that can sneak up on you so well and cause such devastating destruction would have to be unnerving. I bring this up because we do in fact have such an enemy. But I’m speaking not of our nation. I’m speaking of the church. Pay heed to our text.

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 20:17-38

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Some of the best tales deserve a little twist. Case in point – we have a book at home entitled, The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig. It’s a great story. Let me read you the introduction ([READ TLWBBP quote](#)), “*Once upon a time, there were three cuddly little wolves with soft fur and fluffy tails...*” Clearly, this is not your average bed time story. But it’s creative and quite entertaining. One problem though – you don’t want your young ones developing a naïve impression of wolves. For they’re not as cute and cuddly as portrayed in this book. They may have soft fur and fluffy tails. But they also have strong teeth. And they travel in packs. Living in caves, trunks, thickets, or holes – lying low in the day and on the prowl at night, tending to go for the weak, the old, or the young. No, you don’t want one as a playmate.

Such is why when the Scriptures speak of wolves, the image is that of terror and ferocity, of revulsion, of dishonest public officials, of false prophets and false teachers. And in the context of sheep, there comes the call for the shepherd to be on his guard.

Such is what we find in our text this morning. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem and has stopped to meet with the elders from Ephesus. He reminds them of his time with them. And he anticipates what the future will bring – both for himself as well as for them. Which is why he gives them this charge, this command to be on their guard, to keep watch, in their calling as shepherds. Theirs was to feed the flock, to teach the truth. And it was to protect the flock as well, to warn of error. We touched on this a couple of weeks ago but need to look at it now in more detail. For the analogy still holds. The call of the shepherd remains the same today for the needs remain the same today as well. Wolves are on the prowl. The flock is in danger. The shepherds need to be on their guard. And we need to pay careful attention to Paul’s words.

I. ON GUARD BECAUSE OF THE HARM THEY CAUSE

If for no other reason, the shepherds of God’s flock need to be on their guard because of the harm the wolves cause the flock.

A) *Deceiving the Flock*

Look at Paul's words here ([READ Acts 20:29-30](#)).

1. What they do

What is it these wolves are said to do? To speak "*twisted things*" – crooked, perverse, distorted, misleading things. Not outright denying the gospel. Not outright disagreeing or differing with it. But deceiving. Deceiving in what is said and the way it is said.

2. How they do it

And how are they able to do it? Again, which of the sheep do wolves tend to strike? The weaker ones. In this case, not so much of body or of mind but of maturity and discernment. Those who have not the strength to resist or to defend themselves. Those relying upon their own strength as sheep and have drifted away from the rest of the fold.

B) *Drawing Them Away*

Those the wolf, the false teacher, is said "*to draw away*."

1. The reason

Why? Again, Paul tells us. In order "*to draw away disciples after them*." The idea being that they would gain a following, that they are seeking a following, that they are chiefly interested not in God's glory, not in their followers' good, but in their own glory and their own good. Now that sounds harsh. But sometimes it is done with such intentions. Other times it is not. The false teacher may deceive not so much for material gain or greater acclaim but simply because of an aversion to the truth and a need to be affirmed in their aversion. The claims of the gospel can be that hard. Too hard for some.

2. The result

Either way the result is that the flock is not spared and that tearing takes place. Some of you have heard me say this before. Damaged doctrine damages people. And the Lord grieves over such things ([READ Jeremiah 8:7-11](#)). Say what you want but ideas have consequences. Doctrine matters. What we believe matters. What we believe about the forgiveness of God, of our standing before Him, of how that comes about – matters.

Illustration:

Let me paint a picture for you. A farmer feels the cost of oats for his mule is too high. And so he decides to gradually work sawdust into the feed – a little more each day. And everything is fine for a while. Until the mule is dead. Death can come in different ways – suddenly or little by little. And when it comes to bad feed and bad teaching, it usually comes over time by cutting corners, by taking the easier route.

This is why Paul goes on to say what he does in verse 31 ([READ Acts 20:31](#)). He reminds them of his model, of the stance they now needed to adopt as well, of persistent, passionate pastoring and protecting of the flock. Why? Because doctrine matters.

Application:

And so they needed to watch out. And so do we. We need to watch out for teaching that plays upon our fears. Some will say, "*If you keep telling people of the unconditionality of God's love, they'll run amuck. They need rules. You can't take this grace thing too seriously.*" Others will claim, "*But saying they can come to God through Christ on their own, that their service before Him is as worthy as the clergy. You can't say that. They'll run off. We need to be professional about this.*" These are the some of the fears Martin Luther had to counter in his day. And to take a stand against. So too us.

But there are others – teaching that plays upon our desires. Francis Schaeffer spoke of our culture's idolization of "*personal peace and affluence*." Personal peace – no

demands. Affluence – no hardship. Beware of teaching that caters to these desires. The impulse towards individualism – no connection, no authority, no claims. The impulse to a 10-step approach to life – no depth, no addressing the weightier matters of the heart.

Shepherds need to stand guard, to keep watch for such things and lead the sheep a mile away from it. And sheep need to follow such shepherds' lead.

Illustration:

There is a story from the life of Martin of Tours, the saint for whom Martin Luther was named. It was said that Satan once appeared to St. Martin in the guise of the Savior himself. St. Martin was ready to fall at his feet and worship this resplendent being of glory and light. Then, suddenly, he looked up into the palms of his hands and asked, “*Where are the nail prints?*” At this, the apparition vanished. That’s the very question we have to ask as well – where are the nail prints? Where are the nail prints?

II. ON GUARD BECAUSE OF WHERE THEY COME FROM

There comes great harm from any teaching without them. But there is yet another reason Paul calls for alertness. And it is because of where this teaching comes from.

A) From the Outside

Paul says initially this teaching will come from the outside. Again, verse 29 (**READ Acts 20:29**). It will come from wolves creeping in from outside the flock.

1. Inevitable

There is an inevitability to Paul’s words here. It’s as though he’s saying that as sure as there is truth distinguishable from error, false teaching will come (**READ Matthew 7:15**).

2. Explanation

Why is this so inevitable? Because the church is the object of our Lord’s affections. And as such we become the object of Satan’s aggressions. We are in his crosshairs.

B) From the Inside

That alone is disturbing. But all the more so because of what else Paul says (**READ Acts 20:30**). Not only will such teaching come from the outside but it will arise from the inside as well. This goes beyond disturbing. It’s distressing.

1. Others

Some combination of pressures from the outside and weaknesses within will cause some to drift, to become like wolves – to arise from within and tear into the sheep.

Illustration:

I can remember in high school the day when my Young Life leader said to a group of us at a Bible study in his living room, “*Look to your right and your left. Five years from now, those people will no longer be walking with Christ.*” He was right. And what often happened was that as one would drift, others would then go off with them.

2. Ourselves

Which takes me to the next thing – the other way such teaching arises from within – not just from those to our right and left but from ourselves. For such things have to begin somewhere with someone. Look back at verse 28 (**READ Acts 20:28a**). So much of Paul’s counsel here can be seen in his letters as well. To his young protégé, Timothy (**READ 1 Timothy 4:16**). Keep a close watch on yourself – on your inner and outer life, on who you are when everyone and no one is looking. Keep a close watch on the teaching – on the intensity and balance of your study, on what you say and how you say it. And why? Because people are watching, are assessing – not just you but the message

you proclaim and how you live it out. So keep a close watch. Because if you don't, you yourself could become a wolf, deceiving and dragging off the sheep.

Illustration:

Think about it. No one just wakes up and says, "I think I'll set out to apostasize today, to reject the faith and take as many people down with me." It always has a beginning. Think of Princeton Seminary. During the 19th century, her faculty was among the brightest in their field. And beyond that, not only sharp minds in the classroom, but warm hearts towards their students. Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen – they were titans. Their story makes you want to travel back in time. But gradually, as the guard changed, as the guard was dropped, a poison slipped in. A poison which made this once great institution what it is today – a shell of its former self.

Application:

The point is that it can happen anywhere. And the seeds can be within us. What then does this mean for us? Your doctrine can wreck your life. What we believe drives what we do. So you need to watch it. But it can go the other way as well. Your life can wreck your doctrine. The compromises we make, the things we desire, demand, and grasp for can, in time, cause us to cut the corners on what we believe. So watch your life.

Place yourself in accountable relationships. Be open enough with a few others that they can watch with you. Listen to criticism. There's almost always something worth hearing even from our harshest critics. Be wary of novel ideas. New insights may be worth heeding. Then again, they may not. C. S. Lewis said ([READ Lewis quote](#)):

It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read another old one in between.

Be not arrogant. Be teachable. Those who've gone before us have much insight to hand down. Theirs is a voice from another time, another view. And they can speak to our blind spots. Certainly the Spirit can guide any of us in our studies of the Scriptures. But He has guided many others as well from whom we have much to learn. So keep watch.

CONCLUSION:

Think of ships at sea. Buffeted by waves, driven by winds, carried by currents – what holds them? The anchor – its weight, its ability to grab and dig into the floor of the sea. The anchor is what holds the ship in the storm. To know there are fierce wolves out there. To know that they are cloaked in sheep's clothing. And to hear that they move among us and that they may well be us as well. Bracing realities. What braces us?

Or, better, who? Take a step back for from the warnings we see here. Keep them in mind but take a step back. Who has placed the shepherds? Who is behind it? ([READ Acts 20:28a](#)) Who has set His love upon the sheep in such striking ways that should give us all not only conviction but comfort as well? Who ultimately guards, guides, watches over the flock in ways far beyond our imagining? ([READ Acts 20:28b](#)) And so, I ask you, without flinching or forgetting the warnings at all, what are you so worried about?

([READ Acts 20:32](#)) Even in the midst of the most sobering and bracing of warnings, Paul also shows us we have a double resource that will never fail us – God Himself and the Word of His grace. The true and living God upon whom we can rely and entrust ourselves and those dear to us as well. The true and life-transforming message of His grace that we declare even as it is transforming us. Keep these things before you, Paul is saying. Take this seriously. Be watchful. Be alert. But be not afraid.

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