

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

“Famous Last Words:
Important Things to Say before Saying Goodbye”
Acts 20:13-38

Take a first look.

I. The Jewish patriarch Jacob was about to die. Before he breathed his last, he called for all twelve of his sons. One of those had been presumed dead not too many years prior to Jacob's death. He was only recently reunited with the family. That was Joseph. When Jacob had all his sons together in one place, he blessed them. He had already called Joseph and Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, and given them blessings. These blessings were appropriate to the insight God had given him into their respective futures. Then he passed that appropriate insight on to his other sons. Genesis 49 reports this event. For some of them, there was a measure of rebuke, as with Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. For others, there was an anticipation of future hope that was wonderful to contemplate.

II. If we knew that we would only have one more opportunity to speak to our children, our grandchildren, or to our friends, what would we say? What kind of blessing (or curse) would come out of such a conversation?

III. Friends, I remind us that we are leaving behind a legacy of common sayings and attitudes. What do we want our children and grandchildren to remember the most about us? What do we say often and emphatically that will stay with them for a lifetime? Are those really the kind of things we want them to remember? If not, what are we going to do about it?

Take a closer look.

I. TAKING THE TIME: THE OCCASION FOR IMPORTANT LAST WORDS (vv. 13-16)

1. *Time alone*: Paul seems to have planned for some time alone to process his last face-to-face contact with the church in Ephesus. When the missionaries were preparing to travel from Troas back to Jerusalem, Paul sent everyone else on ahead by boat from Troas to Assos, and he traveled there by land, presumably on foot. This was about a 25-30-mile trip, which probably took Paul a couple of days. What was his purpose for such a time by himself? Did he want to make sure that Eutychus was still alive and well, after the trauma of his fall out of the upstairs window in Troas? Was he contemplating his return to Jerusalem, remembering the hostility and threats he faced when he had left there many years before? Was he anticipating his conversation with the Ephesian elders/pastors, knowing what the Lord had revealed to him, that he would never see them again in this life? The answer could be, “all of the above.” Paul valued his limited opportunities with his “children in the faith” to such a degree that he needed time to contemplate both the direction of God's leading and what he would have to say once he had the opportunity to speak to them again.

A—Have we taken time lately to consider our influence on those who follow us? For all of us who are parents and grandparents, we should pause from time to time, turn aside from our busy weekly and daily tasks, take a personal “retreat” and consider what kind of message we want to leave behind when God calls us on.

I—We are rightly encouraged to consider what kind of legacy we are leaving for our children and grandchildren. More important than the disposition of our property is the leaving of a *spiritual legacy*. Several years before Jeannie's grandmother, Beulah Lotz, passed away, we gave her a Grandmother's Book, a journal of sorts with lots of room in it to record special memories and personal reflections. Jeannie's grandmother was really the only grandmother I had known, since those on my side of the family died either before I was born or before I was old enough to remember them. Beulah Lotz was a very special person. She wrote constantly to her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. She told about what was happening with all the other members of the family. She was a catalyst for bringing the family together. Our Lotz Family Reunion was born of that influence, bringing us together in the summer every two years for a few days of fellowship, worship, and fun. Though Grandma Lotz has received her ultimate promotion, awaiting the Resurrection in heaven, the rest of us are still affected by her spiritual legacy. That Grandmother's Book is a great part of that legacy. She took quite a lot of time, the last couple of her years here, to write her thoughts and perspectives and memories down for all to read.

My daughter just gave me a similar book for Fathers to record important perspectives and memories for children and grandchildren. I have it cued up to begin writing in, soon.

Is it too much for us to give some time devoted to preparing such a statement of memories and convictions?

2. *Timely contact*: Paul was obviously in a hurry to get to Jerusalem "for the day of Pentecost," but he made time to meet with the elders from the church in Ephesus. This was en route to Jerusalem. Paul sent for the elders/pastors/overseers (the three words are all used in this passage and are interchangeable) from Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. Again, this was over 30 miles away. It probably took several days both for a messenger to be sent to them and for them to return to meet with Paul one last time. The contact was so important, that they all made the proper effort to get together.

A—Do we place enough value on the timely contact we have with our fellow Christians, with our children and parents, with our grandchildren and grandparents? Every important relationship in our lives has a limited number of opportunities for mutual influence. Are we making the most of those contacts for the glory of God and for a lasting spiritual legacy?

I—I am compelled to remind you of what Gordon MacDonald wrote in his little book *The Effective Father*: "It is said of Boswell, the famous biographer of Samuel Johnson, that he often referred to a special day in his childhood when his father took him fishing. The day was fixed in his mind, and he often reflected upon many things his father had taught him in the course of their fishing experience together.

"After having heard of that particular excursion so often, it occurred to someone much later to check the journal that Boswell's father kept and determine what had been said about the fishing trip from the parental perspective. Turning to that date, the reader found only one sentence entered: 'Gone fishing today with my son; a day wasted.'"¹

We pastors, parents, and grandparents need to remember that time spent building a relationship is never wasted! The shaping of others' character is a life-on-life activity. It takes *time* and it takes *timely contact*.

¹ Mike Schafer, Lubbock, Texas. *Leadership*, Vol. 11, no. 2.

This brings us to the content of Paul's message to the pastors/elders/overseers from Ephesus.

He begins by ...

II. MAKING IT PERSONAL: This is THE BIOGRAPHY OF IMPORTANT LAST WORDS (vv. 17-26).

1. Paul reminded them of the earnestness of his service to the Lord and to them. He describes serving "with all humility and tears and trials." That is quite the combination. In writing to the church in Corinth, he described probably the same period of ministry in these words (2 Corinthians 1:8-9, NIV):

"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

That, my friends, was a very difficult but profitable period of ministry. In our First Corinthians (though perhaps not the first letter Paul wrote to them), we have this: *"But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me"* (1 Corinthians 16:8, NIV). This is where the "tears and trials" came from. *Great opportunities often carry great pain.* You remember from Luke's description in the book of Acts that the message of Christ had gone out from Ephesus in the almost three years Paul spent there and had made an impact on everyone living in the province of Asia. That is truly "a great door for effective work"! But you also remember that it was in Ephesus that a riot broke out, started by a silversmith named Demetrius, because the message about Jesus Christ was cutting into their profits in the diminishing sales of statues of their local deity Artemis (Diana). "There are many who oppose me" really rings true from the book of Acts.

A—This is a simple reminder that anything that we desire to do that has eternal consequences will be hard to do and will be opposed by everyone not sympathetic with the purposes of heaven.

I—Why is it so difficult to take time away from work to develop meaningful relationships with our children, grandchildren, and fellow-followers of Jesus? Because it is so important! As I have heard James Dobson repeat time and time again, "Nothing worth having comes easy." Why would we think that becoming a good wife or husband, a good father or mother or a good grandparent or a good pastor or a good Sunday School teacher would be anything else than "hard to come by"? Do we really want to leave as our spiritual legacy that we would be remembered in this way: "He always chose the path that was easiest and which provided the most personal peace and affluence"? Or, "She only developed relationships based on what she could get out of them for herself"? It is right difficult to overcome our innate propensity to be totally selfish about everything and with everyone, but this is exactly what God will lead us to overcome.

2. Paul reminded them of the scope of his witness to the Lord: he told everything he knew about Jesus Christ to everyone who would listen. Note vv. 20-21. Paul had not only spoken both publicly and from house to house about the message of Christ, he had also called "both Jews and Greeks" to "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

A—Do we have a comprehensive view toward the spiritual legacy we are leaving for others?

I—I often listen to parents and grandparents talk about their children’s and grandchildren’s successes in work and in education. I glory in these with them, you can be sure. I tell my own stories, as you have probably noticed. But while I am surely concerned for my children’s and grandchildren’s responsible actions as adults, I am supremely more concerned with their response to the call of God upon their lives. I want them to live spiritually fulfilled lives most of all as well as fulfilled lives in other ways. We must never forget that we have a whole life from which to draw.

As Samuel Johnson once wrote, “He that would pass the latter part of his life with honor and decency, must, when he is young, consider that he shall one day be old; and remember, when he is old, that he has once been young.”²

3. *Paul reminded them of the resolve of his commitment to fulfill his calling, no matter what may happen to him back in Jerusalem.* See vv. 22-24. The resolve of Paul’s commitment was based on the source of his calling: “having been bound by the Holy Spirit.” It also comes from the value he placed on his message: “the Good News of the grace of God.” With both of these to draw from, he was ready to endure the “chains and afflictions” that awaited him in his future ministry.

A—A major facet of our spiritual legacy is the way in which we have persevered through hardships of various kinds which are often brought on by our determination to do the right thing, even if it hurts.

I—I have thought about my father in this way many times. He and mom moved our family here to Washington from Texas when I was only a lad of the tender age of 5. I have enough of Texas in me to claim it as my home state, but I didn’t really live there long enough to become a real *Texan* [For example, I don’t have a gut-level suspicion of people from Oklahoma. 😊]. My father worked in partnership with my mother as they served the Lord. Mom taught school to pay the bills for 28 ½ years in the public school system, and dad worked at church-planting in rural communities, first in the Davenport-Harrington area of central Washington, and then in Colville, Washington. I never remember feeling that this was anything but a family project. Even though my dad and I had our hard times, especially when I was a rebellious older teenager, I never doubted his love or his commitment to me and my brother. Dad, may I grow to be half the man you had become before your promotion to glory!

Over the years, I can’t count the times that I would have liked to call my father and get his advice. He passed away before I became a pastor. There have been a number of situations in which I would have loved to be able to call him and ask, “OK, Dad, now what should I do?” I have heard some wonderful stories—at least one of which I have shared with you more than once—of dad’s integrity and resolve to do what is right, no matter what the cost. Dad survived World War II and the oil fields of Texas (His own father was killed in those same oil fields in an accident that occurred when my own father was only 7 years of age). Dad worked hard for the kingdom of God in relative obscurity when many of his friends from seminary took comfortable jobs in larger churches in the south. I only hope that some of the spiritual legacy I leave behind will be as honorable.

Paul then goes on by ...

² Samuel Johnson in *The Rambler. Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, no. 1.

III. GIVING THE CHARGE: This is THE CONTENT OF IMPORTANT LAST WORDS (vv. 27-38).

We can review this as a series of four simple imperatives:

1. *Pay attention to yourself and your influence.* Note verse 28. He says, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” That is a wonderful sentence. It describes *the work of pastoral ministry as tending the flock of God*. The meaning of *pastor* is that of the *shepherd*. It describes the power of Christian calling as *the work of the Holy Spirit*. This sentence also describes the responsibility of pastoral ministry: “over which he has made you *overseers*.”

The three words used in this passage for Christian leaders are all interchangeable:

a. The term *elders* (note v. 17) emphasizes the maturity in Christ necessary for pastoral ministry.

b. The term *pastors* (cf. v. 28) emphasizes the relationship and the heart necessary for pastoral ministry, that of the shepherd tending his sheep.

c. The term *overseers* (or, “bishops,” v. 28) emphasizes the *responsibility* entailed in pastoral ministry. The spiritual authority given to pastors is for the glory of God and the ultimate good of the followers of Christ, who are the sheep of God’s flock.

A—By extension, we must all watch carefully our own *character*, what kind of person we are becoming, and our own *influence*, what kind of people we are helping others become.

I—It was Athanasius, that great church leader from Alexandria, Egypt, who lived in the fourth century AD, who made this wry observation: “You cannot put straight in others what is warped in yourself.”³ In the context of that statement, Athanasius was arguing that human beings cannot save themselves. We are the ones that are “warped” who cannot put straight our character or our relationship with God. Instead, we need the Divine Word, the Logos, our Lord Jesus Christ who alone can repair the bent nature of human beings and make us right with the Creator again.

Indirectly, this is why growth in our own character is so important. *We teach a bit less than what we are*. We must allow the Word Himself to straighten us out and then, as He does so, we will be able to allow Him to work through us to help others, including our children and grandchildren, to find the same spiritual and moral help.

2. *Be alert for threats to the truth.* Paul foretells that after he leaves, “savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.” He even predicts that some will rise from their very number and teach corrupted doctrine just to get people to follow them.

A—We must urge our children and grandchildren to become champions of the truth in an era that values pleasant feelings over principled convictions.

I—In 1986, Allan Bloom rocked the academic world with his book *The Closing of the American Mind*. He lodged the argument that every undergraduate student that entered the major universities of America held one idea in common. That idea was the philosophy of relativism, that there is no fixed reference point either for claims of truth or morality, but there is only what is “true for me” and what is “right for me.” This spirit pervades American life now these forty years later. Now, granted, not every principle of truth or morality is an absolute. Case in

³ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation: the Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* by St. Athanasius, translated and edited by Sister Penelope Lawson, S.S.M.V. (Macmillan, 1946), p. 24.

point: whether women wear pants or dresses is optional. *That* they remained dressed in public and that they dress modestly are absolutes from God's point of view. Whether a person attends a church that advocates or abstains from the practice of speaking in tongues may be arguable optional. That every person needs to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to be saved is essential Christian theology. There are a number of examples that could be cited, but this isn't the time or the place. Suffice it to say that God has given us some clear direction about what to believe and how to live through the sacred writings on the Bible. We must teach the coming generations to "*do their best to present themselves to God as those approved, workmen who do not need to be ashamed and who correctly handle the word of truth*" (see 2 Timothy 3:15, NIV).

3. *Trust God and His grace alone.* Paul committed his brothers in Ephesus "to God and to the word of his grace."

A—At some point, a part of our spiritual legacy is this: God has no grandchildren, only children. This means that every generation must deal with God directly and immediately.

4. *Follow the good example you have received.* Paul's example had been one of hard work and absolute integrity. He demonstrated the truth of a saying of Jesus that is not found in the Gospels, but which rings very true: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." You can see the power of his example at the closing scene of this encounter. They all knelt down and prayed. Then they wept as they embraced and gave each other the holy kiss. They were grieved to the heart that they would never see Paul's face again.

A—Can we point to the same legacy of love and integrity and hard work for those who look onto our lives?

I—Lord, make of me not a reservoir to store up your blessings in my own generation, but rather make me a river raging with overflowing banks with the grace of God in Christ Jesus! May You enlarge my heart to love with the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. May You enlarge my mind to learn to think more according to the truth of heaven. May You empower my life that the legacy I leave will be one described as "See what God has done!" not simply "See what a clever or strong man he was."
Amen!

Take it home (applications).

I. What kind of people are we becoming?

II. What kind of spiritual legacy are we preparing for those who follow us?