

GOODBYE OR GOOD RIDDANCE?

Today's Text: Acts 20: 13- 38

Extracts:

From Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church and ...he said to them, "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you... and see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me... Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." ...And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship [Acts 20: 18, 22-23, 28, 36-38]

The whole world was captivated when America's Apollo 11 crew made man's first landing on the moon.¹ As Neil Armstrong set his left foot on the surface of the moon on that fateful day, July 21, 1969, he spoke his now famous words, "That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind." Since then, he has been honoured and celebrated. But on August 25, 2012, Armstrong died at the age of 82. Again, the whole world felt the loss of the first man to land on the moon. NASA has immortalized the world's grief by recently releasing a tribute video that brings back vivid memories of the world's respect for Armstrong. What a way to say goodbye to a loved one.

Death is one and most painful opportunity to say goodbye to departing loved ones; but every parting is not death-related. For example, many of us are leaving our present locations by resignation or retirement or relocation. How do those we are leaving behind feel about us? Do they even miss us at all? What record would you like to leave behind so that your departure will be seen as goodbye rather than good riddance? In this week's Bible story, Paul was about to finally return to Jerusalem, and he called the elders of the church at Ephesus to bid them farewell. What did he say to them and how did they react? Was it goodbye or good riddance? There is something there for us to learn in building a better legacy wherever we may find ourselves.

¹ Based on the following sources: Charles White, "Neil Armstrong Remembered in NASA's Touching Tribute video," *Mashable*; 16 September 2012; <http://news.yahoo.com/neil-armstrong-remembered-nasas-touching-tribute-video-124544015.html> ; and "Neil Armstrong," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neil_Armstrong

1. Background: It was a tearful farewell for Paul

Human beings are always on the move. As some are being born, others are dying or moving on. For example, some people are relocating from one part of the country to another or from one part of the world to another. Children are grown and moving out of their parents' homes, leaving behind an empty nest for their aging parents. Some workers are going on vacation or transfer or on retirement. Some marriages have failed and the partners are going their separate ways. In each of those circumstances, there are feelings of loss or relief, depending on the circumstances. Nevertheless, ***parting on good terms with a lasting memory is preferable and desirable***. With the exception of parting by death, it is quite possible that your paths and those of the people you are leaving behind may cross again in the future. How would you feel to discover that the person you never expected to meet again has become an unavoidable contact for your next crucial break in your career or ministry or political ambition? That is why ***it is important to pay serious attention to how you part or depart***. Would you want those you are leaving behind to wish you goodbye or good riddance? Those are the issues that we shall attempt to answer in this week's study.

The Bible passage comes from Paul's farewell meeting with the church elders from Ephesus. As he wound up his missionary journeys in Greece, he planned to sail past Ephesus because he was hurrying to get into Jerusalem, possibly, on the Day of Pentecost. So, from Miletus, he sent word to Ephesus to invite the elders of the church to meet him [**Acts 20: 13-17**]. The meeting turned out to be a "send off" party. Here are the highlights:

a) *Paul's parting words*

Paul broke the news of his impending departure quite carefully. He began by reminding his listeners about the key points of his ministry among them, namely [vv. 19-21]:

- To serve the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials in the face of religious and political persecutions;
- To keep back from them nothing that was helpful but to openly proclaim it and teach them publicly and from house to house;
- To testify to both Jews and Gentiles repentance toward God and faith to Jesus Christ

The time had come for him to leave. He told them, "Now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me." Nevertheless, Paul was not moved by fear for his life but by faith in God to finish his earthly race with joy for the ministry that he had received "from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the

grace of God.” Then, with an emphatic tone, he told them, “You all ... will see my face no more” [vv. 22-25].

You can imagine the consternation on the faces of his hearers and listeners. But, knowing Paul, he was not going to leave them without comforting words. He told the church elders to [vv. 28-30]:

- Take heed to themselves and all their flock over whom the Holy Spirit had made them overseers, “to shepherd the church of God” purchased with the blood of Jesus;
- Be aware that after his departure, “savage wolves [would] come in among [them], not sparing the flock.” Even from among themselves, “men would rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.”

Finally, he commended the elders to God and to the word of His grace that is able to build believers up and give them an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. He reminded them how much he had to provide for his necessities instead of relying on the church because, in the words of Jesus Himself, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” After that, he knelt down and prayed with them [vv. 32-35].

b) The church elders’ reaction

The elders could not hold back their emotions any longer for “they all wept freely, and fell on Paul’s neck and kissed him.” His parting words had given them sorrow because “they would see him no more.” Then they accompanied him to the ship and bade him goodbye [vv. 37-38].

That was an emotional occasion. Tears flowed. They were going to miss Paul and he was going to miss them. ***He did not leave them valuables (such as material wealth) but values (integrity and godliness). The memory would be long-lasting. They said goodbye because they would miss him.*** How would you like to be remembered when you leave your present position?

2. What “Goodbye” would you rather have?

Sooner than later, we all reach that point when we must move on. But ***it is not on the day of departure that you make the record on which those you are leaving behind will judge you or remember you by.*** It was at the point of being sacked from his job that the unjust steward tried to cook his employer’s books in favour of debtors but it was too late to thereby get a memorable goodbye. He received good riddance [Lk 16: 1-13]. Therefore, now that you are still alive or in service is an important opportunity for you to honestly assess yourself and prepare for the send-off party that awaits you on that fateful day-by death or by relocation. Here

are the most common “goodbyes” that one can find in practice, among so many others:

a) *Good riddance!*

In this case, the people we are leaving behind rejoice over the departure of the “wicked person” who had made their lives miserable over the years. From your own perspective, you might have tried to enforce rules and regulations or tried to do things God’s way. On the other hand, you might have been the major corrupting influence in the organisation or church. In both cases, those left behind will see your departure as good riddance!

Take the case of the people of Egypt under the Pharaoh that made life difficult for the children of Israel. When God sent Moses to ask the king to let the Hebrews go, he refused. As a result, God visited ten plagues on Egypt, the last one being the death of the firstborn of each household, including the Pharaoh’s heir to the throne. The king called for Moses and Aaron before day break and urged them to leave Egypt right away with their flocks and herds and “*be gone.*” We are told, “And the Egyptians urged the people, that they might send them out of the land *in haste.* For they said, ‘We shall all be dead’” [Ex. 12: 31-33]. That was good riddance!

Nevertheless, the departing children of Israel were happy to go because they did nothing wrong against the Egyptians. In fact, God made them find so much favour with the Egyptians that they gave them whatever they asked for—articles of silver, gold and clothing. They “plundered the Egyptians” [vv. 34-36]. Therefore, *if you know that you have bequeathed integrity and fear of God to the people that you are leaving behind, you should not worry how they feel on the day of your departure.* In due course, retrospective appreciation will set in and your memory will grow with fondness over time. The converse is also possible. You can mesmerize those you are leaving behind with short-term palliatives like material perquisites or undeserved high grades (by some lazy university teachers) only for beneficiaries to discover over time that you had conned them! *The best thing is to do right by man and God and depart without worrying about other people’s perception of your record.*

b) “Come back soon!”

In this case, your departure is only for a short time. For example, you could be going away on vacation or a course or on secondment to another place. It could also be due to an illness or temporary relocation like exile during a crisis. In such cases, the attitude of those you are leaving behind will be one of “come back soon!” They will miss you but they are comforted by the fact that you will come back soon.

That was the situation when David parted from Jonathan as Saul tried to kill David. Jonathan was David's close friend and brother-in-law as well as heir to the throne. Jonathan had made a covenant with David to show him the kindness of the LORD while he (Jonathan) still lived, but much more, not to cut off his kindness from his house forever [**1 Sam. 20: 14-16**]. So, at the point of parting, Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, since we have both sworn in the name of the LORD." So, David arose and departed while Jonathan returned to the city [v. 42]. A feeling of loss was minimized because they both looked forward to a meeting in the near future.

What temporary parting does is to give us an opportunity to assess our relationships with other people. We may discover that we had been more users of other people's goodwill than enablers. *That suggests that the chance to return is also an opportunity to make up for your past lapses.* On the other hand, a temporary parting can easily become good riddance. For example, when General Ibrahim Babangida, the military Head of State of Nigeria (1985-93) annulled the free and fair Presidential elections of June 1993, he was forced by popular agitation to hand over to an interim (civilian) leader. When he was leaving, he said that he was "stepping aside." He never came back! Therefore, your record may determine whether "come back soon" (a form of goodbye) can easily become good riddance.

c) *"Join you soon!"*

In some cases, your departure is as part of an advance team and those you have left behind will join you in no distant future. For example, a husband may go ahead of his wife and children to get a job in the city or abroad, with the hope of bringing the rest of the family after he has settled down. Or a person may be on an important political or spiritual assignment and choose to leave his family behind until it is safe to bring them over. For example, it was after Moses had led the children of Israel out of Egypt before his father-in-law, Jethro, brought his wife and children to join him in the wilderness [**Ex. 18: 1-5**]. Partings under such circumstances are best characterized as "Join you soon!"

The hope of reunion can minimize the sense of loss that parting provokes. Nevertheless, it can also produce anxiety! Why wait at all? Why not leave sooner than later? For example, when Jesus was leading His disciples to the mountain from where He was going to ascend into heaven, the disciples asked Him, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" [**Acts 1: 6**]. They could not wait to get into the final act! So, if those left behind are anxious to join the departing party, there is a wholesome goodbye feeling. That was why the disciples returned to

Jerusalem with joy after Jesus had ascended into heaven “and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God” [Lk 24: 52-53]. But if the departure makes life better for the left-behind party, that could be good riddance! So, choose!

d) *“Never can say goodbye!”*

This kind of parting is sad because it has the mark of finality. The dead will not come back. The retiring worker may not return to work there any longer. The child who is leaving to get married cannot return as your “baby in the crib” any longer. The emigrant may not see grandma alive again. Paul’s parting was in this category because he told them and they knew it that they would see him no more. Tears flowed. Uncertainty rose. “Never can say goodbye” by the Jacksons easily comes to mind here.

Human methods to comfort both the departing and staying parties may not be enough to relieve the sense of loss. You need hope anchored on faith to do that. That was what Paul did for the elders of the church at Ephesus. ***That is what only Christ can do for you when you confront a goodbye situation.***

3. Conclusion: Let not your heart be troubled!

As Jesus was close to the end of His earthly ministry, He told His disciples, “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.” In His Father’s house were many mansions and He was going there to prepare a place for them so that they would also be where He is [Jn 14: 1-3]. Elsewhere, He also assured them, “In Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” [Jn 16: 33].

Therefore, ***you no longer have any reason to fear that pending death in the family or your knocking retirement date or your growing empty nest in the huge family house. You no longer have to fear that sooner than later, you yourself may have to say a final goodbye to your loved ones. Be assured of one thing: if you have already given your life to Christ, it will be goodbye not good riddance!*** That is why the word of God says, “A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one’s birth” [Eccl. 7: 1].

Now, you can say goodbye quite easily!