

OHBC Departure

- After a week away from our study of Ezekiel, today you would expect me to dive back into chapter 13 so we can continue our examinations of Israel's excuses to God
 - And of course we will do that...soon enough
 - But today I'm going to take a break from our Ezekiel study to consider another passage of scripture
 - Turn in your Bibles to Acts 20, to a passage we studied in the recent past during our Ephesians study
 - We're going to be look at it again today for reasons that will become clear during the course of our teaching this morning

Acts 20:17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

Acts 20:18 And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time,

Acts 20:19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;

Acts 20:20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,

Acts 20:21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 20:22 "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,

Acts 20:23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.

Acts 20:24 "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

Acts 20:25 "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face.

Acts 20:26 "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.

Acts 20:27 "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

Acts 20:28 "Be on guard for yourselves and for 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.

- You may remember that as we began our Ephesians study, I went to this passage to introduce the personality of the church in that city
 - This scene in Acts 20 records Paul's parting words to the elders of the city of Ephesus before Roman escort took him to trial before Caesar
 - As we learned in our previous study, Paul knew this would be the final time he would see these men
 - Paul lived and ministered in Ephesus for a number of years, so he grew quite close to the people run that church
 - So as he greets there here, Paul takes opportunity to remind them of how he lived and ministered among them
 - Paul is so well known for his long missionary journeys around Asia Minor
 - But sometimes we forget that Paul often stopped for years at a time in one place as he ministered
 - He lived among those he taught, serving as counselor, a model and an authority for those early churches
 - But at some point, when the Spirit moved him, Paul would pick up stakes and move to the next city where God had a new work for him
 - Paul moved this way continually for decades, and it meant he was forced to repeat moments like this one over and over again
 - He had to say goodbye to people he loved though he wished he could have stayed
 - And as he left, he knew the church would face threats of one kind or another
 - But he also had confidence the Lord had good reason to move him and therefore, the church was in good hands
- I want to highlight three things that Paul emphasized to these men during their parting
 - First, Paul reminds these men of the manner of his ministry in the time he spent with them
 - Paul was a man of great honor and privilege and esteem in the church

- He could have expected to be treated with great distinction, to remain aloof, unapproachable
 - But how did Paul relate to the people in his role?
 - Paul says in v.19 that served the church in Ephesus in humility, in tears and in the midst of trials
 - We have only Paul's own words about himself, but these people knew him personally
- So we can validate his testimony by the way the church responded to him
- Glance down to the end of the chapter and look at how they departed

Acts 20:36 When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

Acts 20:37 And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him,

Acts 20:38 grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.

- Based on their response to Paul, we know Paul spoke honestly... he was not aloof or harsh or egotistical
 - We know he lived among those he ministered to in humility, working as they worked, counting himself one among them
 - He ate with them, laughed with them, studied with them, fellowshiped with them
 - And as he said, he cried with them during trials
- The early church was blessed with great growth as the Spirit established the body on the truth of the apostles' teaching
- But it also endured great difficulties
 - It didn't always grow, it didn't always prosper
 - There were moments of betrayal, rejection, disappointment
 - To say nothing of persecution
 - And Paul lived among them through all these experiences, in humility, not counting himself above them, but one of them

- And in Ephesus – like in every city Paul ministered – the people grew to love the man for who he was, not just for what he taught
 - Which made his missionary movements all the more difficult
 - Each time he moved on, it was like leaving a family behind
 - The elders of Ephesus knew Paul was headed to almost certain death in Rome, as Paul says he would not see them again
 - Obviously, Paul meant he would not see them again in this life, for he knew he would see them again in the Kingdom
 - But our hope in that future reunion doesn't completely erase the pain of the separation we experience now
 - They wept for him, even grieving over Paul's words that he must go in chains to Rome
 - People don't weep over the departure of aloof leaders, or tyrants or academics...they weep for friends
- Secondly, Paul says in v.20 that he did not shrink from declaring anything that was profitable, both publicly and house to house
 - Of course, Paul's speaking about teaching the word of God to this church everywhere he ministered in that city
 - The truth of God's word is the profitable thing Paul shared with this church
 - He did not shrink from declaring the word to them, and particularly the Gospel as Paul says in v.21
 - The word shrink could be translated draw back, like the way a piece of paper collapses upon itself when it burns
 - Curling back on itself, as if afraid of the heat, trying to escape the flames
 - Shrinking back is that instinct we all know to save ourself, to avoid something difficult, to retreat from negative consequences
 - Paul says he never did that for the sake of this church
 - He never pulled back from delivering the truth

- He didn't seek to save himself, whether from persecution or criticism or exhaustion or rejection
- His goal wasn't making friends or impressing the people
- His only goal was to deliver the truth of God, trusting that word to accomplish what was intended by God
- And then trusting the Lord with the consequences
- Notice in v.27 Paul repeats again he didn't shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God's word
 - Paul understood that sometimes the word of God reveals things that please us, and we will embrace those messages with eagerness
 - But then there are other times, perhaps most times, when God's word reveals something that we don't prefer to hear
 - Times when it corrects our thinking or behavior
 - When it challenges our beliefs
 - When it offends our pride...it usually offends our pride
 - And teachers recognize these moments in the text
 - And when we do, we may be tempted to change the message, to soften the blow, to conceal the truth
 - Paul knew understood this too, of course, and like any teacher he might have been tempted to change the message
 - Knowing his audience might respond negatively to what God's word proclaimed, he could have withheld it from the church
 - But *because* Paul loved God's people so much, he didn't shrink back from delivering to them the whole counsel of God's word
 - He didn't leave out the unpleasant parts, the convicting parts, the challenging parts
 - Because he knew that these were the *profitable* part of God's word, the parts that held greatest potential to grow them spiritually
 - If these people were to receive the greatest possible reward in the Kingdom, they needed to hear the full truth of God's word

- So Paul honored the Lord and he loved the church by delivering the whole truth
- Finally, Paul said he knew his ministry did not belong to him, but to the Lord... Paul was merely a caretaker
 - In vs.22-24 Paul speaks of why he must leave them, but consider his words in light of his situation
 - Paul was being sent to Rome on a ship, and when the ship docked at Miletus, Paul sent word for the elders of Ephesus to meet him here
 - So as Paul stood before the elders and spoke these words, he was a Roman prisoner
 - He would have been bound in chains and at least one if not more Roman soldiers were standing guard over him
 - Therefore, it would have been obvious to everyone why Paul was leaving them and why they would not see him again: the reason was Rome
 - But Paul doesn't say a thing about his arrest or the Roman guards
 - He doesn't express hope for a return or even suggest he wish he could stay longer
 - Instead, Paul says he is bound by the Spirit and headed to Jerusalem, so matter of factly that it sounds like he's going on a cruise
 - He says clearly that the Spirit gave him this plan, not Rome
 - Furthermore, Paul indicates he is following it willingly and obediently, not against his will
- Moreover, in v.23 Paul says afflictions awaited him and in v.24 he says he has finished his course of ministry
 - Paul was not naive about what was going on here
 - He knew death awaited him, but he went willingly
 - He knew this was a decision of God to bring his ministry to an end
 - Therefore, Paul knew that to resist these events was resizing God Himself, and therefore could not have accomplished anything

- Even if Paul had found a way to escape Roman chains and return to Ephesus one day, his ministry there was over
 - The Lord sets the course of everyone's ministry
 - He defines it, He opens doors, He appoints the results
 - So when his time was complete, Paul knew he only to obey
 - He could never have worked beyond what God established
 - And the Lord says we're done, we're done
- So Paul served for as long as God desired in humility, teaching the word faithfully, and acknowledging the Spirit's authority to direct his ministry
 - Paul is a model for all of us, and especially for men who serve congregations in pastoral ministry
 - I try to live up to his standard in my pastoral ministry
 - I try to live by Paul's words to the church in Corinth

1Cor. 11:1 Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

- But it's hard enough imitating Paul, much less Christ
 - Like everyone, I have an ego that loves attention and praise
 - Still, my goal is to serve God's people in humility as Paul did
 - As you've heard me say from time to time, I see myself as just like you
 - I'm a fellow servant of Christ, a member of this church, someone who serves with his gift in the way all believers do
 - I believe that's the humility Paul modeled and expected from the church leadership
- I also try to follow Paul's example in teaching the whole counsel of God
 - But the temptation is there to just teach things you want to hear
 - To soften the blow, to overlook the critiques, to tickle your ears
 - But I can honestly say I seek to teaching the whole counsel of God's word without shrinking back

- I want the Word God and the Author of that Word to be exalted through my teaching, no matter the cost
- And I'm grateful for a church body that wants to hear the whole truth, which makes this job a lot easier
- Nevertheless, I also know that at times folks may be offended by God's word, and some may even chose to break fellowship over it
 - In the end, I cannot control how God's word works in a person's heart
 - All I can do is commit to remaining faithful to its declaration and trust the Lord's will be done along the way
- Finally, it's always been my ambition to follow Paul's example in allowing the Lord to direct my steps in my personal ministry
 - Many times we wonder what the Lord wants from us, but I'm convinced that the Lord is more than capable of making His will known, especially in key moments
 - You won't miss the Lord's direction when He's speaking...though we may chose to ignore it
 - Still, I've modeled my own ministry on Paul's confidence to let the Lord direct his steps without doubt or second guessing
 - When Annette and I first arrived at OHBC, we knew this was where the Lord called us
 - And we knew this despite the improbably nature of the relationship
 - I wasn't pastoring at that time nor looking for such a prospect
 - OHBC was an hour and a half away, I had full-time work responsibilities in SA
 - And I had other ministry responsibilities too
 - Still, I knew the Lord opened this door, and I felt bound by the Spirit to step into the role and preach and pastor as best I could
 - And so we began to serve here and before long the Lord confirmed that we had made the right decision

- We were blessed by the fellowship and prayers of this sweet-hearted church
- I was able to preach the word, which answered my own prayers
- And within a month after I began serving here, my father contracted a serious illness which has required constant care since
- So my weekly trips to Austin allowed me the blessing of seeing him and caring for him each week over the past nearly 10 years
- As the years passed and we continued to make the weekly drive to Austin, Annette and I constantly second guessed the Spirit and our own hearts
 - We asked the Lord do you want us to move to Austin permanently?
 - We asked if the church was to move to another building or merge?
 - We asked if the church should seek another pastor and if we step down to make room for that process?
 - And through the years, the Lord stopped each of these paths
 - He remained silent on any question we posed, so we felt called to continue in the current path
 - You've heard me say before that when you're seeking to know the Lord's will and you aren't hearing anything, just keep doing the last thing you heard Him tell you until you hear something new
 - So Annette have continued to make the drive each week, teaching, serving and loving our OHBC family in obedience to the Lord's instructions
 - Still, we continued to seek the Lord's will wondering what He might say next
 - And after ten years of faithfulness and waiting, we believe we have now heard that answer from the Lord
 - And so like Paul, we believe we are bound to follow the Spirit's direction no matter what challenges lie ahead
 - We believe the day our reassignment in ministry has now come by the Lord's appointing

- And so I informed the elders earlier this week that the Lord has called me to step down from pastoring at OHBC so that we might plant a church in San Antonio
 - We have not come to this decision easily or without much thought and prayer
 - I sought the Lord's counsel repeatedly, and He has confirmed this change to us in many ways, both big and small
 - So like Paul, we are bound by the Spirit to go in a new destination and to enter into a new season of ministry
 - My heart is heavy as I share this news with you, which is ironically another way I follow Paul's example
 - You are our church family, and after ten years of serving Christ with you, we have come to love each of you dearly
 - In 29 years of married life, we have never spent longer in any church than the ten years we have spent here at OHBC
 - We are leaving behind a body we dearly want to see lifted up and prospering
 - And like you, we wonder what the future holds for OHBC and for us
 - But I take great comfort knowing OHBC existed long before I became your pastor
 - And I know this is Christ's church and that He cares for each one of you personally
 - And so I believe that by the grace of God OHBC has a very bright future
- Still, a pastor's departure is disruptive, and naturally, you have concerns and questions
 - You may be wondering about the future of OHBC
 - Or who will fill the pulpit until the next pastor is found
 - Perhaps you're even questioning your future commitment to this body
 - If so, that's to be expected

- But as you contemplate these questions, also consider why you attend OHBC in the first place
 - Some of you are here because OHBC is your church
 - You've attended here for years, maybe even decades, long before I came
 - You were raised in this church, perhaps your kids were raised in this church
 - For you, OHBC is simply the place you've always worshipped
- Other of you are here because I'm your pastor
 - You joined during my tenure and you stayed because you appreciate my style of teaching
 - Perhaps you heard my teaching on the internet before you ever attended OHBC
 - For you, OHBC is about studying God's word and you believe I'm the one God has provided to teach you
- Then others of you are here because your parents bring you, or your spouse brings you
 - You're here because it's convenient or close
 - Or maybe you like the music or maybe it's the friendly people
 - All good reasons, but none of them are especially profound
 - For you, OHBC is simply the church for you today, but who knows about tomorrow
- No matter which of these categories describes you, may I suggest that none of them are accurate for any of you
 - Each of you is a part of the OHBC family because the Lord has called you here and placed you here for reasons of His own beyond your immediate understanding
 - The same holds true for Annette and me
 - We certainly set out to attend a small church 80 miles from our home and do that for nearly a decade

- The Lord brought us all here, and I believe He did that to train us up in our work of service and teaching and to develop our spiritual maturity
- To teach us service, charity, and love
- And He kept this church small and He limited our resources to ensure the right conditions where these lessons could best be learned
- And He did these things for you too
- The Lord has more lessons to teach here at OHBC, new lessons that can only be learned by experiencing the transition from one pastor to another
 - Lessons of patience, of persistence, of faith in the Lord
 - But if you're going to gain the benefit of these lessons, you'll need to be here
 - You can't see what comes next and benefit from that chapter if you're too busy looking past it
- The story of OHBC isn't complete yet and neither do I believe is your part in this church
 - It's no surprise to hear me say that having your pastor living in another city is not good for any church body
 - For ten years OHBC has sacrificed a lot to have me as your pastor,
 - But now the Lord is preparing to end that sacrifice and bring this church what every church needs: a local pastor who can teach the word AND minister to the needs of this body in a daily fashion
- If you're wondering are we going to disappear today, the answer is no
 - The elders and I agreed to a transition period during
 - Over the next few months, I expect to continue serving as your pastor
 - We'll be here as usual at least for a while

- The exact length of time is unclear, since it depends on how quickly OHBC finds a new pastor and how soon our church planting effort in SA gets underway
- But sometime in the coming weeks or months, I will preach my last sermon behind this pulpit
- When the day comes, we will weep with you as Paul did with the church in Ephesus
 - But we will also be excited for you, because we know the Lord has something better in view for His people here
 - We thank all of you for the countless ways you have loved us and cared for us over these years
 - You have encouraged us, prayed for us, supported us financially, and made us feel appreciated
- We will always cherish our time at OHBC, and I count it as the greatest privilege of my ministry career to have served as pastor of OHBC
 - This little church is a special place, and you are a special group of people
 - I pray you will remember what makes this church special and that you will protect it
 - And I pray we have served you well
- May the Lord bless OHBC for years to come