

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them:

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

(Acts 20:17–38)

## Introduction

What a time in which to live!

Politically, South Africa, along with much of the world, seems to be in turmoil if not in chaos. We hear weekly of the horrific, ugly bickering among political parties. This is true in so much of the world. Governments worldwide are in disarray.

Economically, we are experiencing a negative growth rate resulting in a recession. The weak Rand and high unemployment only add to the economic woes.

Socially, South Africa face a deep crisis with a devastating rate of poverty, the pandemic breakdown of the traditional family, and a plethora of dysfunctional families. When you add to this disappointing equation our extremely high rate of crime, it is no surprise that we seem to have a collective psyche of pessimism about the future.

To top it off, the world seems to be heading for panic over the outbreak of the coronavirus. Having, at the time of writing, infected over 100,000 people worldwide resulting so far in over 3,500 deaths, talk of a pandemic seems to be on everyone's lips. As I was typing this, I was notified that South Africa had verified its first case.

Epidemiologists are working hard to find a vaccine. State of emergency measures are being enacted including banning large crowds. Airlines are cancelling routes and laying off staff. World Stock Markets are taking a beating and many people, pensioners particularly, are wondering how this will affect their financial (in)security.

Churches are being effected as measures are being discussed and put in place to guard against its spread as believers gather on the Lord's day. At least one country that I'm aware of has banned church (and other religious) gatherings.

Yes, things are troubling. How then shall we live?

Acts 20 helps us to constructively answer. We need spiritual 20/20 vision for missions in 2020.

In this study, my goal is to help prepare us for how we should think about our responsibility to the Great Commission. We are in difficult days as a nation and, of course, this affects us as a church. But so was the early church. And yet the early church remained faithful to the task of the Great Commission. The early Christians remained faithful to the mission of God. So must we.

As we look at Acts 20, we get a glimpse of the kind of spiritual vision we need to remain faithful. I want us to have a spiritual eye exam today as we look at Acts 20 and at a man who had 20/20 spiritual vision for the Great Commission in circumstances that most of us—perhaps all of us—can only imagine. Paul serves as a wonderful example of a man who had 20/20 vision for missions. We will look at his example, and his instructive and constructive exhortation, under four headings.

### **The Meaning of 20/20 Vision**

Simply, 20/20 vision—of the kind of which we are speaking—is the spiritual vision to see beyond the obvious to the ultimate; the spiritual vision to see our purpose in the midst of our problems; the ability to see and to focus on the Lord rather than only seeing and focusing on our challenges and problems. We need to keep worshipping, to keep working in the face of what are very real woes. Paul did. We have been saved and sent by the same Lord. Let us keep worshipping and working.

Paul was aging. He was perhaps in his mid-to-late 50s. He had planted a number of churches throughout Asia Minor (Turkey), Greece, and further into modern-day Europe. Along the way, he had suffered huge ministry setbacks. Early in his mission he has experienced disappointment with co-labourers (John Mark, Barnabas, Demas, etc.) His newly-planted churches had been assaulted by false teachers and threatened by false gospels (see Galatians). Even co-workers like Barnabas and the apostle Peter had caused confusion (Galatians 2). He had been viciously and maliciously slandered within circles where he should have been, but was not, defended (see 2 Corinthians; 1 Thessalonians). He had been horribly treated by the likes of Alexander the coppersmith (2 Timothy 4:14) who did him “great harm.”

He had suffered physically. He had been beaten mercilessly and even left for dead on at least one occasion. He had suffered hunger, many sleepless nights, and bodily weakness. He may have had a serious eye problem (see Galatians). He may have been in his 50s but he perhaps looked like he was late 70s.

He had also suffered relationally. He had once been a Pharisee of Pharisees and blameless concerning the law (Philippians 3:4–6). He had studied at the feet of Gamaliel, *the* Rabbi of the day (Acts 22:3). We can therefore assume that he had been raised in a supremely orthodox home and so his family would not have taken kindly to his conversion to Jesus Christ. We know that, after his conversion, he spent some considerable time in his hometown of Tarsus (Acts 9:30; 11:25). No doubt, while there, he had sought to win his family to Christ. From the silence of that period, and from what follows, we can surmise that his family rejected both him and his message. Is this perhaps why he was single? We can almost say for certain that Paul had been a member of the Sanhedrin. A requirement for membership was marriage. Did Paul’s wife leave him after he came to Christ? Regardless, we can conclude that Paul had had it *very* tough relationally.

Yet, after all of this, Acts 20 finds Paul faithfully serving the Lord. He was on his way to Jerusalem to continue to serve the Lord.

We know that, though he was the apostle to the Gentiles, he carried a serious burden for his own people (Romans 9:1–3; 10:1). So he aimed once again to try and save some at the Passover Feast (Acts 20:16). He was in a hurry to get there; he wanted to avoid any unnecessary delays. And yet he carried a deep burden for the churches he had left behind. He seems particularly concerned for the church at Ephesus, and so he sent for the elders (v. 17).

There would have been a several-day journey to and fro for the messenger. Paul was willing to wait for their arrival. But he seemingly was not willing to go to them. *Why not?*

To make a long and credible conjecture short, Paul was hesitant to go directly to Ephesus because of a history of serious conflict there. I concur with others that Paul’s first imprisonment was most likely in the region of Ephesus, if not in Ephesus itself. It was from there that he wrote what we know as the Prison Epistles (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:32; 2 Corinthians 1:8–9).

Paul was no coward. You can’t read the book of Acts (or his epistles for that matter) without concluding that he was one of the bravest men in history. He was the kind of faithful and courageous man necessary to bring about earth-shaking impacts. He had faced an angry and vengeful Sanhedrin, angry Jews, and hostile pagans (Acts 16–19; 20:3, 19).

His hesitancy was not from fear of harm; it was from fear of hindrance. He was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem, even though he was certain that troubles faced him there. His passion for the gospel and his passion to evangelise the lost—including, as we have seen, his fellow Jews—drove him to get to Jerusalem without unnecessary delay. He was prudent in the face of danger. He knew there was a time to face danger and a time to flee it. Now, it was time for the latter.

### 20/20 Vision and Our Plans

This account in Acts 20 highlights Paul's clear-sighted, 20/20 spiritual vision for the Great Commission. Paul saw clearly what he needed to do. He saw clearly the priority of making disciples of the Lord Jesus. And this priority influenced his decisions, including his travel plans. This priority influenced how he spent his time.

He knew he must not waste time. He knew how to invest his time, including both evangelism (in Jerusalem) and discipleship (of the elders at Ephesus).

Paul took the time to remind these pastors to have 20/20 vision for God's mission—for the Great Commission of making disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This, as John Stott points out, is the only address in the book of Acts to a Christian assembly. All other recorded sermons and addresses are in the context of evangelism. So here we have a glimpse of what an edificational sermon looks like. We have a glimpse of one who is exhorting and discipling fellow Christians. And even though the audience was composed of pastors, it provides a helpful pattern for all disciples of Jesus as we aim to improve, or at least to maintain, 20/20 vision for the Great Commission.

Paul was of the view that he would not see these men again (vv. 25, 38), which makes these words all the more poignant and all the more important for us to heed. If this was the last time he would speak with them, we can assume that Paul chose his words carefully. His address tells us what he deemed to be most important—that is, proclaiming the gospel of God as the way of entrance to the kingdom of God (vv. 24–25).

### What in the World We Should Be Doing

With all that is happening in the world, it's essential that we do not lose our biblical perspective as to why we are in this world: *to disciple the nations to the glory of God* (Matthew 28:18–20).

From the first page of Scripture, the Great Commission has been God's purpose for his people. Adam and Eve were to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with other God-worshippers. The progression of the godly line (Genesis 5) shows this commission in action. This Great Commission is reiterated after the flood (Genesis 6–9). God's choice of Abraham, through whom a nation would arise, and through whom the promised seed (Genesis 3:15) would come by which all the nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:1–3) is a working out of the Great Commission. Jesus commissioned the nucleus of his church who then passed it on to others (Matthew 28:18–20).

Apart from the initial commission (Genesis 1–2), the Great Commission was given to God's people in some of the most dismal of social and cultural circumstances.

For one example, consider what Noah and his family must have faced: loneliness, the enormity of the task, etc. Or consider the struggles faced by Abraham and Sarah and the hostility of Jewish religious culture towards the early disciples.

Yet God expected his people to maintain their covenant. God expected them to carry on with their mission.

He expects the same of you and me. He expects the same of every member of the local church individually as well as the church corporately. As we face a 2020 of uncertainty, we are to face it with 20/20 vision for missions.

It is all too easy for our spiritual perception to grow blurry. It is all too easy to develop cultural or circumstantial cataracts over our souls and to become, well, like the world: watching out for ourselves and a devil-may-care attitude towards those around us, especially towards those around the world.

But we dare not. If our eyes have been enlightened by the gospel, we must put those gospel lenses on each day, each hour, and look at our lives and the lives of others through it.

### The Miracle of 20/20 Vision

I read recently of a program called, “VISION 2020,” which is a “global initiative to eliminate the main causes of all preventable and treatable blindness as a public issue by the year 2020.” It was launched in February 1999. It has not achieved its goal. It would take a miracle. So does ours.

Spiritual eyesight is a miracle that only God can do. When God saved and commissioned Paul, he gave him a humanly impossible assignment. Paul would recount it before Agrippa and Bernice:

And I said, “Who are you, Lord?” And the Lord said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

(Acts 26:12–18)

No wonder Paul told these elders that he had been among them with “all humility” (v. 19). Paul realised he was dependent upon God to bring spiritual sight to those spiritually blind.

No wonder he commended them to “God and the word of his grace” (v. 32). For only by the power of God’s word can sinners be made to see. When preached “repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 21), he knew these are gifts of God (Ephesians 2:8–9; 2 Timothy 2:25).

### Christians and Churches are Miracles

Remember that, when Paul came to Ephesus, there were no Christians, no churches, and no elders. But, by the power of God, people repented and believed the gospel. This was a miracle, which resulted in the blind now seeing.

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But go back further in history. Go back to Acts 8, where Paul was giving consent to the persecution of Christians (8:1–5). Go back another chapter to where Paul was participating as a condemning witness at the stoning of Stephen (7:58). The man who at one time was ravaging the church (8:3) was now willing to be ravaged himself for this gospel. What a miracle!

Paul the murderer was now Paul the missionary. Paul the hater was now Paul the lover. Paul the persecutor of the Lord (Acts 9:4–5) was now Paul the servant of the Lord (20:19). What made the difference? The gospel of God.

Upon Paul's conversion, he was not apparently "happy all the day"—at least not initially. Rather, he became blind, perhaps because of the light of the glory of God (9:3, 9). Later, when he was filled with the Holy Spirit, the scales fell off his eyes and then he could see again. For the first time, he could see clearly (9:17–18).

It appears that his physical eyesight remained a problem (see Galatians 4:15; 6:11), but his spiritual eyesight improved remarkably. He could now see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). He could see Christ in the Law and the Writings and the Prophets.

But Paul could also now see—in fact, he seems to have been the first one to see—that Jew and Gentile were now united in one body: the body of Christ. And he made this known to the church at Ephesus (Ephesians 2:11–3:12). They were able to see because Paul had experienced the miracle of seeing.

The point I am driving at is that Paul had 20/20 vision for missions—for the Great Commission—because God did a miracle of the new birth in his life.

If we will have similar spiritual eyesight, we too need to experience this miracle. That is, we need to see if we will see. Do you? Have your eyes been opened to see the glory of Jesus Christ in the gospel?

If God has saved us, we see the world completely differently. Serving the Lord will now be our desire. Being concerned about reaching others with the gospel will begin to loom large on our agenda. When God opens our eyes, we will begin to grow in love for those who are different from us. The scales of prejudice will begin to fall away, and we will begin to see the image of God in all peoples. And the more we grow in Christ, the better our vision to reach the nations with the same miracle producing message.

Brothers and sisters, it is a miracle that we even care. Our sinfulness makes us so self-absorbed that our involvement in the Great Commission can only be chalked up to a miracle of the powerful grace of God. Because of this miracle, we care enough to send our best—as the church at Antioch sent their best (Acts 13:1–5ff).

Because of this miracle, we care enough to pray for others, even for nations and peoples about whom we know little (Do you know anyone in Western Sahara?)

Because of this miracle, we care enough to give sacrificially (2 Corinthians 8–9). Because of this miracle, we care enough to pay a price (see Acts 20:19, 34–35). Because of this miracle, we care enough to look beyond our own backyard (see Acts 11:27–30). You see, when we experience the miracle of God's saving grace, we begin to see all the world as God's backyard and therefore ours as well.

Perhaps you are a bit lost right now. Perhaps you are thinking, "But really, I don't care. All I care about is this service ending so I can go watch sport, or plan my next holiday, or build my next house, or make

more money.” Be honest. If you don’t care, admit that. And be alarmed. Be afraid. Be very afraid. If you don’t care, it is because you are not converted. You may be religious, like Paul was, but, like Paul, you still have no sight. He was religious, but he loved the world. He did not have the love of the Father in him.

John said that those who love the world do not have the love of the Father (1 John 2:15–17). John warns that all that does not align with the love of the Father is passing away. Those who do not love the Father are passing away. Passing away into eternity without God. That should be sobering enough to bring you to ask God for repentance and faith so that you will see as you need to; to see as you should.

Christian, thank God that he has miraculously caused you to see. But, like your physical eyesight, it can fade. It fades as we focus on the fallen and fading. Be honest: Is your vision for missions the same as it was last year? Or in years gone by?

May God wonderfully and powerfully work in our lives today and during this year to again stir the miracle of having 20/20 vision for his mission.

### Maintaining 20/20 Vision

Sight is a wonderful gift, and perhaps we appreciate it more when it becomes impaired. Stewardship of sight is essential.

Perhaps, like me, you had parents who warned, when we were getting rowdy, “Be careful! You could put an eye out!” I never quite understood some of their argumentation. After all, what harm was there in shooting each other with pellet guns? Sometimes it seemed that this was one warning always within easy reach and so, regardless of what we were doing, the ubiquitous “You might put an eye out” was hurled our way.

But seriously, eyesight is so important that we are taught to be careful. The same can be said—*should* be said—for spiritual eyesight. We need to be good stewards of this miraculous gift.

Peter writes that believers are to add to their faith various virtues. That is, they are to grow in their knowledge and in their likeness to Christ. He writes, “For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins” (2 Peter 1:8–9). And in that memorable exhortation by Jesus to his church in Laodicea, he said, “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see” (Revelation 3:18–19).

The point is that, once our eyes are opened to the beauties of Jesus, we must work hard to maintain this. Once these opened eyes to Jesus lead to opened hearts, opened mouths, opened hands, opened homes, opened wallets for the Great Commission, we will need to maintain this openness. 20/20 spiritual vision requires we focus on the beauty of our Lord.

The great missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson, wrote, “I have had such views of the loving condescension of Christ and the glories of Heaven, as I believe are seldom granted to mortal men. Oh the Love of Christ! It is the secret of life's inspiration and the source of Heaven's bliss. Oh, the love of Jesus! We cannot understand it now, but what a beautiful study of eternity!” I am not sure at what point in his life he wrote this, but I know that there was another period in his life when he literally dug out his own grave and sat next to it and wrote, “God, to me you are the great unknown.” But he kept seeking the Lord, and was able to have 20/20 vision again. One reason was because he believed God’s word. In response to a reporter, who suggested that, in the face of his wife dying, his ministry seemed to amount to nothing, while he faced slander and even imprisonment, he said, “The future is as bright as the promises of God.” That is 20/20 vision! That is the kind of spiritual vision Paul had. That is the kind of vision he disciplined his elders to have and that he now exhorts them to maintain. That is the kind of vision we need to have and to maintain.

In vv. 18–21, Paul reminds them of what they knew by observing him when he ministered for three years in Ephesus.

It would seem that as in Thessalonica and Corinth, Paul was being bad-mouthed in Ephesus, slandered by perhaps false teachers or perhaps disgruntled church members. His use of somewhat defensive language (v. 18) indicates that he is defending himself against those saying otherwise. Anyway, Paul honestly shared his heart. He highlighted his humility, his tears, his testing (at the hands of belligerent Jews), and his faithfulness to preach and teach God’s truth (repentance and faith). “He taught the whole truth to the whole city with his whole strength” (Stott). He was seeking to be an example to these brothers so that they might persevere and maintain their vision.

From his description, it is obvious that Paul faced many difficulties as he obeyed the Great Commission. He speaks of the trials that happened to him as he experienced the various plots hatched by the Jews to oppose if not to actually kill him. And, by the way, a lot more of that was yet to come his way in chapters 21–26.

For Paul to have persevered over this three-year period of intense ministry implies that he maintained his vision. Again, the key concept is “serving the Lord.” He loved Jesus. It is that simple, and that difficult.

We are in a world that is no friend to grace or to God. There are all kinds of challenges to our devotion to the Lord. Somehow Paul maintained his vision in the face of this this. How? I would suggest that he did so by never losing sight of the gospel which he preached. He kept preaching the “gospel of the grace of God” (v. 24), to others as well as to himself.

The message of our vision, the message which produces the miracle of our vision must remain dear to us. We must preach it not only to others, but to ourselves as well. Paul often shared his testimony (see chapters 22 and 26). He never got over what God, through Christ, had done for him. This maintained his vision.

○ that we would love the Saviour! If we did, the pettiness, grumbling, critical spirit, and cynicism that so often hinders churches would fall away. The materialism that robs others of the gospel would be gutted of its power. The obsession with self-preservation individualism that withholds labourers from the vineyard would be dealt a severe blow. In fact, in what Paul says in vv. 22–27 testifies to this. He moves from “you know” to “I know.”

Paul's goal was *not* to survive at all costs but rather to finish the race in which God had entered him (v. 24). His conscience was clear.

Paul then combined past (“you know”) and future (“I know”) in a charge for present ministry: “Be vigilant!” (v. 28ff). They must watch themselves and then the flock. They must care for that which has immense worth and be cautious of imminent wolves. They must commend the church to the inspired word.

In short, the way to maintain 20/20 vision for the Great Commission in the midst of challenges is to both expect problems and to look to examples of endurance.

Paul told the elders what he expected (v. 23) and what they should expect (v. 29). Don't be fooled by the lies of a prosperity theology. Christians, the local church will face difficulties as we serve the Lord (v. 19) *because* we serve the Lord (John 16:33). The gospel progresses on and through problems. In this way, God gets the credit and the glory.

But the elders must also look to examples. This, of course, is what Paul was doing here. He said, “Maintain your vision and your mission. I have faced severe difficulties, yet the Lord has proved faithful.” They could look to his example of endurance (vv. 19–24), faithfulness (vv. 25–27), and sacrifice (vv. 33–35). Humility, heartache, and hard work attend the mission. And a heart for the Lord empowers our vision.

### **Be Exhorted as You are Exposed to the Word**

We must be exposed to God's word. It is the source of our vision and it provides us with the sustenance of our vision for it points us to the Sovereign of our vision.

If you are *not* faithfully gathering to be exposed, it is doubtful you are deeply involved in the Great Commission. Avail yourself of the opportunity to experience the exposition of God's word. Experience the joy of being exposed to God.

### **The Means of 20/20 Vision**

There are several essentials we could place under this heading: the word, prayer, sacrifice, missionaries, etc. But one will encompass all of these. It is found in v. 28. Of course I am speaking of the local church.

Paul knew that the elders needed to maintain their vision of the local church if they would persevere in making disciples who would make disciples. After all, the local church is God's means for his mission. There is no substitute. Parachurch ministries are not the substitute. No, messy, sin-challenged, sometimes hurtful and petty local churches are the God-ordained means towards God's ordained end of the Great Commission. Paul therefore exhorted these elders to keep caring for the church.

There is nothing on earth more precious than your local church. Think about that. After all, for what else has God shed the blood of his own Son? Nothing else. Be careful how you treat God's possession. Be careful how you treat Christ's bride.

Local churches, founded on and grounded in the gospel of the grace of God, are the means for getting this gospel to every people on this globe. As we minister to build up our local church, our vision for

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the Great Commission is strengthened as our love for Jesus grows. The result is that other local churches are blessed.

It is not our seating capacity that measures our greatness but rather our sending capacity. And this depends on each of us serving the Lord.

Brothers and sisters let us corporately love and serve the Lord maintaining 20/20 vision for his mission. A simple way to contribute to this is to pray for and to gather with the church to sharpen your vision. As we celebrate what God has done, our vision can improve and we will do so much more, to the good of a world in need, for the glory of God.

AMEN