

Scripture Readings for August 28, 2022

1 Chronicles 29:10-20 (NIV)

¹⁰ David praised the LORD in the presence of the whole assembly, saying, “Praise be to you, LORD, the God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. ¹¹ Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. ¹² Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. ¹³ Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.

¹⁴ “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. ¹⁵ We are foreigners and strangers in your sight, as were all our ancestors. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. ¹⁶ LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you. ¹⁷ I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things I have given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you. ¹⁸ LORD, the God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, keep these desires and thoughts in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you. ¹⁹ And give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, statutes, and decrees and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided.”

²⁰ Then David said to the whole assembly, “Praise the LORD your God.” So they all praised the LORD, the God of their fathers; they bowed down, prostrating themselves before the LORD and the king.

Acts 20 (selected verses) 17-18, 21, 27-32

¹⁷ From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ¹⁸ When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. ²⁷ I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole purpose of God. ²⁸ So, watch out for yourselves and for the whole flock, in which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as guardians, to feed the church of God, which he purchased with his very own blood. ²⁹ I know that fierce wolves will come in after I am gone, and they won’t spare the flock. ³⁰ Yes, even from among yourselves people will arise, saying things which will distort the truth, and they will draw the disciples away after them. ³¹ Therefore keep watch, and remember that for three years, night and day, I didn’t stop warning each of you, with tears. ³² ‘So now I commit you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those whom God has sanctified.

How DO You Say Goodbye?

How do you say “goodbye”? We all know from personal experience that it’s never easy because we are emotionally connected to those we are leaving. I have faced this numerous times in my life beginning with going to boarding school at the age of nine, to leaving family and close friends in different continents on multiple occasions, to saying farewell to work colleagues and international collaborators, and to saying goodbye to a dying wife. I am facing it again with you today. You too will have your own recollections of farewells, and I don’t think it’s made any easier with frequency. Loss and change remind us of life’s uncertainties, and even our own mortality. But not all goodbyes are on the same footing. We must also remember that “in every ending there is a new beginning.” There is *hope* for new things, even *better* things - including new life - that as yet are still in a fog of an unknown future. Now, because “goodbyes” are a universal experience, we shouldn’t be surprised that the Bible contains a number of farewell speeches¹ made by notable leaders, such as Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Paul, Stephen, and Jesus. Such speeches have various stylistic features in common and so I want us to explore their collective wisdom in learning how to say goodbye in the context of being a minister.

Let’s begin by considering King David’s farewell speech that we heard earlier, a speech given at the opening of the new temple built by his son, Solomon.² This speech is a *prayer* that begins by praising God for *who* God is.³ We are familiar with some these words because they have been adapted into the *Great Prayer of Thanksgiving* that is part of the liturgy for Holy Communion, where the minister says on behalf of the people: “Yours, LORD, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendor, and the majesty; for all things come from you and of your own do we give you.” David reminds his people that God is deserving of their never-ending praise. Four reasons are given to honor God: (a) the LORD, as Creator, owns the world; (b) as its King, the LORD is supreme over the world; (c) and the LORD is the source of all human wealth, and (d) the source of all human power. In light of that, it is appropriate that we give thanks, and praise God’s character, capabilities, and reputation, as well as being mindful of our accountability to God in how we use the wealth, power, resources, and talents that God has given us.

I am sure that you, like me, have visited grand cathedrals that have been built to the “glory of God.” Now imagine this prayer of David in the spectacular new temple, the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant, the place where God’s glorious presence on earth was deemed to be most intense. Even in that unique place, which cost a fortune to build, David acknowledges his own poverty and that of all the people in comparison to God’s ownership of all things. David says, “Everything comes from you,

¹ To be fair, such biblical speeches are typically *death* speeches!

² 1 Chron 29:10-20 is a fragment of a longer speech. There are other reported “last” speeches of David too. In 1 Kings 2:1-9, we read his words of instruction to Solomon: “Do what the Lord your God tells you. Walk in His ways. Keep all His Laws and His Word, by what is written in the Law of Moses. Then you will do well in all that you do and in every place you go” (v3). But then it goes on to give Solomon instructions to remember all David’s enemies and not to let them get away with it! In 2 Sam 23:1-7, David prophecies under the power of the Spirit.

³ On the matter of prayer, see also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Ordinary-Prayers-For-Ordinary-People-pdf> .

and we have given you only what comes from your hand.” We made a similar declaration a few weeks ago when we celebrated the significant upgrades to this beautiful sanctuary. David reminds the people, including ourselves, that it’s *not* about *ownership* but responsible *stewardship* of what is already God’s. David also acknowledges that God knows all that can be known, including the human heart. David is aware that God is delighted with integrity, and David knows *that God knows* the people have given willingly and joyfully to the building of the temple. Their motivation was right and appropriate.

David’s prayer then ends with two petitions: first, that the *personal* God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will, as in the past, *continue to be* with the people in the future, *reminding* them of God’s Lordship and care [providence], and asks that God will keep the people’s hearts loyal to God. Second, David prays for his successor, his son Solomon, that he too will have wholehearted devotion to keep the law of Moses. David knows that he himself has done all he can, even though his actions were at times far from perfect, and so now *trusts God* to guide and take care of what will come next after his absence. David’s prayer is a balanced prayer, worthy of our reflection and attention. And all his people responded, saying “Amen” and they praised the LORD.

Now let’s briefly consider Moses’ farewell speech to the people as they faced crossing the River Jordan into the Promised Land; he said: “The LORD *your* God himself will cross over *ahead of you*. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified, for the LORD your God goes *with you*; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”⁴ In case the people didn’t get that the first time, Moses *repeats* his message and adds, “so do not be discouraged.”⁵ Moses knew from experience that there will be cause for dismay on some days and so he tries to instill *perspective* by reminding the people that the LORD is *their God* too and God will be present with them. Those are appropriate and wise words for us all to remember today.

And they should remind us of Jesus’ final words to his disciples in Matthew’s Gospel. The risen Jesus begins by boldly asserting: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”⁶ And then he commissions them to make new disciples throughout the world, baptizing and teaching them everything he taught.⁷ There is a vivid *comparison and contrast* with Moses’ farewell speech here that we do well not to overlook. Jesus *doesn’t* tell them to follow the law of Moses, as David [and Joshua] instructed the people, but to spread the good news message of his *own* teaching.⁸ And then Jesus concludes, “And surely *I am with you always*, to the very end of the age.” Note, he *doesn’t* say “The LORD your God goes with you and will never leave you,” as Moses said. No, because all authority in heaven and on earth has now been given *to Jesus*, as demonstrated by the resurrection, he says “*I am with you always* and *I will never leave you*.” We can all take heart by those reassuring words too. In John’s version of Jesus’ farewell speech, he takes time to encourage his followers even as Jesus faces

⁴ Deut 31:3, 6.

⁵ Deut 31:8,

⁶ Matt 28:18.

⁷ Matt 28:19.

⁸ The writer of the book of Hebrew also recognized that Jesus was greater than Moses; see Heb 3:1–6.

his own death. Even when the future is unknown and realizing that life's events may lead us to think otherwise, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; *my peace on my terms* – not the world's – do I give you. So don't let your hearts be distressed or lacking in courage. . . for I have overcome the world."⁹

In Joshua's farewell speech to the people, he gives the people a history lesson reminding them of God's gracious and powerful acts from Abraham onwards.¹⁰ Don't forget the past as you move forwards, he says, and he adds: "Obey the LORD and worship him with integrity and loyalty."¹¹ He then reminds them not to follow other gods, which in our context means *anything* that we consider more important than God and in which we place *more* trust than we do in God. Joshua concludes: "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."¹² And all the people listened and agreed and said, "We *also* will serve the LORD, for he is *our* God too,"¹³ and they get up a large marker stone as a reminder. We too have choices to make in times of change; let's all choose to continue serving the Lord!

Our final example comes from the New Testament and is a farewell speech of Paul from Acts.¹⁴ After all his missionary journeys, Paul feels compelled to go to Jerusalem even though devout Christian leaders have warned him that if he goes, he will be arrested.¹⁵ In Miletus, a coastal Greek city in modern-day Turkey, he spoke to all present, including elders from nearby Ephesus with whom he had worked for 3 years. Paul's farewell speech contained autobiographical references to his past ministry with them.¹⁶ He states, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole purpose of God."¹⁷ He emphasizes his faithfulness in preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus the Messiah and what that means to *all* the peoples of the world. And then, following the Old Testament model of farewell speeches from Moses and Joshua, he warns them to be on their guard. Wolves will attack the flock, he says, and false teachers from within the community will distort the truth and try and lead some astray; therefore keep watch.¹⁸ Then, knowing that his work was done uses words reminiscent of those earlier from King David, "I now *entrust you* to God, and to the message of his *grace*, which is able to build *you* up and give *you* the inheritance among all those whom God has set apart for himself."¹⁹

So, *how* does a minister say "goodbye"? We have just heard some notable biblical examples and from them we can make the following observations. First, the shepherd reminds their flock of the nature of

⁹ John 14:27, see also John 16:33; 20:21.

¹⁰ Josh 24:2-13. See also Samuel's farewell speech which says, "Only fear the LORD, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you," 1 Sam 12:24.

¹¹ Josh 24:14a.

¹² Josh 24:15b.

¹³ Josh 24:18b.

¹⁴ Acts 20:17-35.

¹⁵ See Acts 20:22-24; 21:4, 10-14.

¹⁶ Acts 20: 18-20, 33-35. He mentions his humility and courage in the face of opposition from external agitators.

¹⁷ Acts 20:21, 27.

¹⁸ Acts 20:28-31.

¹⁹ Acts 20:32. In 2 Tim 4:7, Paul also describes his ministry in terms of an athletic race, saying: "I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith! (This letter describes a later time when Paul was facing his death in Rome.)"

the God they both serve and of God's faithfulness throughout the ages. The shepherd stresses that *his* God is also *their* God; *my* God is *your* God. Remember, God is a *relational* God, and that relationship *isn't* just with leaders like Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and Elijah but the God *of the people*. That is particularly true in this post-Pentecost era where God's Spirit has been given to *all* people, not just to ministers!²⁰

Second, as the shepherd reflects on their own role and reminds the people of it. I can humbly state along side Paul that in my preaching and teaching "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole purpose of God." Naturally, I have brought my own interpretive lens to each week's passage, but I have tried to be fair-minded with it and not merely make it say what *I* want it to say, especially in the cases of challenging and unpopular texts! All my sermons are on the church website, and I encourage you to read them again and further digest their contents.

Third, the shepherd encourages and exhorts their flock to keep on moving *forward*, and not to look *backwards*, because God *continues* to go with you in the next chapter of your journey. When Alexander the Great arrived on the shores of Persia in 334 BC, he gave the order to "burn the boats." In that act, Alexander committed his men to victory over the Persians who greatly outnumbered his troops. This military tactic has been repeated throughout history²¹ as a motivator for the troops to be *united*, to work together for a *common* goal, and to ensure everyone looks forwards and not backwards. That doesn't mean we can forget the important lessons of the past, but "burning the boats," as it were, might stop us all from longing for the "good old days." That said, I remind you again that the church does *not* go forward unaided because the Divine Spirit goes with each of you and is among you all; the story of St. Andrew's Amherstburg is *not* over.²² Consequently, I can confidently *entrust you* to God's gracious care, just as David, Paul, and Jesus did. Remember that's a *two-way* covenant; it involves your *love* and *trust in God* too, which itself is practically demonstrated by extending love and grace to others.²³ (I mentioned that last week.) Paul also ends his farewell speech with a reminder to be compassionate, to help the vulnerable, and to be generous.²⁴ Elsewhere Paul exhorts the church with a final instruction, "So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and full of resolve. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless or wasted."²⁵

Fourth and finally, the shepherd blesses the people, including their successor as in the cases of Moses and Joshua, and Elijah and Elisha. I therefore bless each of you in the authority of Jesus the Messiah,

²⁰ See Acts 2:16-21, citing Joel 2:28-32.

²¹ For example, in 1519, Spanish Captain, Hernán Cortés landed on the shores of the new world, Mexico, and also gave the order to "burn the boats." And Sun Tzu in his book "Art of War" (roughly 5th century BC) taught armies to burn their boats and destroy the bridges behind them as they advanced into new territory. He argued that soldiers without the option of taking flight are more likely to prevail over their objective.

²² See John 14:16-17, 26.

²³ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Go-Do-and-Live.pdf> .

²⁴ Paul concludes with the words of Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35, see also Matt 10:8 - "Freely you received, freely give," and 1 Cor 16:1-4.

²⁵ 1 Cor 15:58.

whom God raised from the dead. Allow me to adapting the priestly blessing of Aaron: “The LORD bless you and keep you; may you vividly experience God’s presence, grace, and peace.”²⁶ And I bless my successor, whoever that person is; I pass on the baton given me to them, as Elijah gave his mantle to Elisha. And in keeping with that famous succession story, I pray that they will be *twice* as effective as me!²⁷ Paul’s letters also end with such blessings and they too stress being aware of God’s grace. One familiar trinitarian example is this well-known benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”²⁸ Amen. Let us pray.

²⁶ See Num 6:22-26.

²⁷ See 2 Kings 2, esp. 9b, 13.

²⁸ 2 Cor 13:13; cf. Gal 6:18. (Paul’s frequently mentions God’s grace in his blessing, and his own love for the people.)