

Kingdom Continued, Acts 20:17-38

Bradley Bell

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Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. Last week we kicked off an emphasis on our Antioch identity as family, as well as a new sermon series in the letter of Ephesians titled, "Into the Fullness of Christ". That means, Antioch men, this Tuesday night begins your four-week formation training led by Pastor Jason Crigler. This also means we are still digging into the story of how the Ephesian church was planted and grew.

So I invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to the book of Acts chapter 20, which you can find on page 929 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. Last week we considered how God's kingdom came in Ephesus. This week we'll be looking at how God's kingdom *continued* in Ephesus. Thus the title of today's sermon is "Kingdom Continued". If last week's main idea was that "The kingdom comes in power and mystery," this week's main idea is that "The kingdom *continues* in the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The way that God's word will apply that to our lives today is:

- 1) Remember how the kingdom came to Ephesus - vv. 18-27
- 2) Follow Paul's example so the kingdom continues - vv. 28-35

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Acts 20:17-38. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² 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. ³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ 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.' "

³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ 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

The Lord has spoken to us. [Congregation:] Thanks be to God! You may be seated.

Exposition

Whether or not you had heard these two words since they were first spoken back in 2016, chances are, you are familiar with them now, and may even never forget them. What words am I talking about? "Mamba out." These words became memorialized around the world a couple weeks ago when legendary basketball player, Kobe Bryant, also as known as "the Black Mamba," was tragically killed with his 13 year-old daughter in a helicopter accident. The words "mamba out" actually had nothing to do with the accident, but date back to Kobe's farewell speech at his last game before retiring (a game in which he scored 60 points). At the end of his speech, at the end of a storybook career, he simply said, "Mamba out," and he dropped the mic to the floor. None of us, nor Kobe himself, had any idea that those words would soon come to represent his untimely death at 41 years old.

Why am I bringing this up? (Especially since it still makes me want to cry for lots of different reasons.) *Because there's something really significant about a farewell speech, especially from someone influential, and especially from someone who is about to die.* And that is precisely the situation in today's text.

Last week we read that after Paul had been used by God to see the kingdom come in Ephesus, in such a way "that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord"¹ and multiple churches were planted², he

resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." Acts 19:21

So after the crazy riot that we read about in Ephesus, Paul encouraged the disciples and departed.³ Then he passes through other churches to encourage them as well, and especially the church at Corinth, where he spends three months and during that time writes his letter "Romans," sent to the church in Rome. From there he continues on to other churches, and then we read this in v. 17:

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

Why would Paul do this? It had only been months since he was with these elders, and it would've been an *eight-day journey* for them to Miletus and back.⁴ We're not certain, but it likely had something to do with the fact that everywhere Paul went Christians were prophesying that he would be imprisoned and afflicted in Jerusalem. In other words, Paul was convinced that he would never see these brothers in Christ again.

Let me ask you, if you were convinced that you were never going to see people you love again, wouldn't you want to offer a good farewell? Something that would stick with them, help them to continue on long after you're gone? Of course! That's just what Paul is doing here.

And the pattern he follows takes us back to the Old Testament, where a prophet named Samuel has just anointed Israel's first king, Saul, by the faithless request of the people.

¹ Acts 19:10

² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), Loc 22110; Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), Loc 832

³ Acts 20:1

⁴ Schnabel, Loc 23084, 23419

And Samuel calls them to remember his example among them and how God was their true King, and then he entrusts them to the oversight of God, saying,

“Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil. Yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. ²¹ And do not turn aside after empty things that cannot profit or deliver, for they are empty. ²² For the Lord will not forsake his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. ²³ Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you, and I will instruct you in the good and the right way. ²⁴ Only fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you. ²⁵ But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.” 1 Samuel 12:20-25

That’s a farewell speech that’ll ring in your ears! Samuel wasn’t dying here, but if he was, here’s what he wants written on his tombstone: ‘Led people to follow the Lord. Told them to keep following him.’

So as Paul considers his own farewell speech, he may be looking back on this. Let’s see what he wants written on his own tombstone.

1) Remember How the Kingdom Came to Ephesus - vv. 18-27

This brings us to our first application this morning: remember how the kingdom came to Ephesus. Read with me in v. 18:

¹⁸ 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, Acts 20:18

What Paul is going to do here is point to his own example. And he does this first for the *elders* of the church. These are a *plurality* of men (God’s idea, not ours!) whom God has called to be the pastors, the guardians, the overseers, the stewards of the church.⁵ So, fellow Antioch pastors, we should especially be attuned to Paul’s words here. But Antioch members, don’t think you’re off the hook. You should know that this is the only speech in the entire book of Acts that is addressed to *believers* rather than non-believers.⁶ So, Paul is saying *to all of us*, ‘This is how the kingdom comes in you

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1980), 348-349

⁶ Schnabel, Loc 23419, 23595, 23618

and through you.’ Seven observations I want to make about the kind of person the kingdom comes through:

A) God’s Kingdom Comes Through a *Humble* Servant

[From the first day Paul set foot in Asia, he was (v. 19)] ¹⁹ *serving the Lord with all humility*

So first, God’s kingdom comes through a *humble* servant. This is the primary characteristic that Paul points to, and really, it defines all the rest. It’s how he constantly describes himself throughout his letters. God doesn’t look to build his kingdom through the one who’s most *gifted*, but the one who’s most *humble*, who’s willing to do whatever God tells them to do.⁷ Clean toilets, change diapers, pray in secret, give generously, teach children, host people.

Over the years I have worked with many pastoral candidates. Sometimes their primary characteristic was just the opposite. The deeper I dug in the more I saw that they were full of pride and mainly wanted to do the flashy parts of ministry, preaching and telling people what to do, not praying and listening and weeping with people, visiting the sick and early morning meetings and administration. There have been times when I told them that they weren’t ready yet to be a pastor, that they needed to just serve the body for a time without any position of leadership, they left and found a place that immediately installed them. That’s not how God’s kingdom comes. That’s being a master instead of having a Master. ‘But what about my gifts?!’ Jesus says, “I am among you as one who serves.”

In fact, the way that Paul will conclude his speech is by saying, “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.’ ”⁸ This is what characterizes Christian life ministry on any level!

B) God’s Kingdom Comes Through a *Genuine* Servant

Paul continues that he served the Lord with all humility

and with tears

⁷ Marshall, 349

⁸ Acts 20:35

So second, God's kingdom comes through a *genuine* servant. What Paul means here is that he genuinely loved God and his church. He didn't fake it, and people knew it because he was truly present and he expressed emotion; he was often moved by the joys and sorrows of relationships. Our culture today will sniff you out quick if you're fake; but it will also take note when you're genuine. The saying is true: people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Sadly, some of the most inauthentic people I've ever met are Christians. I find myself often sitting with other Christians and saying to them, "I just want you to know that you don't have to impress me. I would like to know who you really are, and I would be glad to share who I really am." This is one of the greatest kingdom gifts we can give to one another.

C) God's Kingdom Comes Through a *Suffering* Servant

Paul continues, not only with tears, but

with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews;

So third, God's kingdom comes through a *suffering* servant. Like we talked about last week, when things got messy, Paul didn't shut down. In fact, just like Jesus, these sufferings were usually the most fruitful parts of his life and ministry. In fact, later in his speech he will say, "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 Paul models for us what it means to wear the yoke of Jesus, and he obeys.

Katie and I have learned in our marriage, and we share this as often as possible with other young couples, what draws us closer to God and one another, what changes us most, isn't romance or vacations or marriage books—it's suffering through something together, clinging to Jesus for dear life together. The temptation of course is to get rid of the suffering—this marriage is too hard, or this kid is too hard, or this ministry is too hard, let's just run from it. But it is "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

D) God's Kingdom Comes Through a *Bold* Servant

Pauls says in v. 20, remember

²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable,

So fourth, God's kingdom comes through a *bold* servant. Paul loved God and the church enough to speak the truth in love, even when it might not be received well.⁹ We will hear later in Ephesians 4 that speaking the truth in love is how we actually grow up as a church.¹⁰ And if you were around for our 2019 membership series, which was subtitled, "Speaking the Truth in Love," you have heard about this. If the kingdom is going to continue coming at Antioch, we have to have more than just the pastors boldly and lovingly speaking the truth.

In fact, someday all of us will stand before God, and especially we who are teachers¹¹, and be held responsible not just for what we *did* say, but what we *didn't* say. This is why Paul says later, "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 [or purpose] of God." He's making a reference to the prophet Ezekiel, whom the Lord calls a watchman for the people of Israel; that is, he watches for the enemy and warns the people when there's danger. If the watchman doesn't do his job, the people die.¹² So Paul has been a watchman for the church at Ephesus, and at the end of his post he can say, "I'm innocent! I warned you about everything from the word of God, even when you didn't like it."

In the years since I've been a preacher, multiple people have said to me, "Why did you have to preach about *that*; bring up *that topic*; focus on *those verses*?" And my response is always the same, "IT'S NOT UP TO ME! I'M A SERVANT!"

E) God's Kingdom Comes Through a *Relational* Servant

Paul also says that he went about

and teaching you in public and from house to house,

So fifth, God's kingdom comes through a *relational* servant. Paul wasn't distant from people like a celebrity, but who he was publicly was also who he was privately, in their homes. This is why at Antioch we seek to make our base of operations as much as possible not just in this building or in coffee shops, but in *homes*.

⁹ Marshall, 349

¹⁰ Ephesians 4:15

¹¹ James 3:1

¹² Ezekiel 33:1-9

F) God's Kingdom Comes Through a *Gospel* Servant

Paul said he was also (v. 21)

²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 20:19-21

So sixth, God's kingdom comes through a *gospel* servant. This is a summary of what Paul preached to everyone. And it takes us back to Acts 2, where Peter said to those who would make up the very first church, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."¹³ Paul never moved past this basic message: turn away from your sins and turn in faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, later in his speech he will refer to this as "proclaiming the kingdom."¹⁴ So Paul can essentially say, 'I only said what God told me to say—not girl, wash your face and stop apologizing—believe in *yourself*. I preached Christ crucified.¹⁵

G) God's Kingdom Comes Through a *Finishing* Servant

Lastly, and very fitting as the final observation, Paul says in v. 24:

²⁴ 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. Acts 20:24

So God's kingdom comes through a *finishing* servant. There are a lot of Christians who start well, but far fewer who finish well. Paul's like, "What does any of it matter if I blow it all at the end?!" Literally he says, "I do not account my life *worth a single word*"—not a single word on Paul's tombstone would matter if he finished in disobedience to King Jesus.

Kobe Bryant one time, when asked if he was just happy to have the opportunity to be in the NBA championship game, he said this: "The opportunity is not something that makes me happy, it's winning and taking advantage of the opportunity that makes me

¹³ Acts 2:38

¹⁴ Acts 20:25

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:23

happy. That buzzer goes off and we're not victorious, am I [just] thankful for the opportunity? Nope."¹⁶

Man, we could all use a little more of that mentality in our Christian journey! Lord, "give me an undivided heart that I might fear your name," Psalm 86:11. Lord, I wanna hear, "Well done good and faithful servant," Matthew 25:21. And I'm not just talking about death:

- Moms, I know some of you just want this season with little ones to be over, but finish strong!
- Students, I know some of you are just over it when it comes to school, but finish strong!
- Men (or simply, professionals), I know some of you are bored with your current state of life and fantasizing about something better, but finish strong!
- Empty nesters and retirees (or perhaps, singles and couples without kids), I know some of you are tempted to make this season all about what you want to do, but finish strong!¹⁷

This is how God's kingdom came in Ephesus—tiny, unimpressive acts of faithfulness from servants of King Jesus. Church, remember this.

2) Follow Paul's Example So the Kingdom Continues - vv. 28-35

But don't just remember it, also follow Paul's example so that the kingdom continues. This is our second point of application this morning. Read with me in v. 28:

²⁸ 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. Acts 20:28

Here's the first example we need to follow in order for the kingdom to continue here at Antioch: pastors, pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock. Another way Paul puts this in 1 Timothy is "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching."¹⁸ This is why we constantly use this refrain "in you and through you". It all starts *in*

¹⁶ Kevin Ding, "Kobe Bryant's Post-Game 6 Interview," <https://www.ocregister.com/2010/06/15/kobe-bryants-post-game-6-interview-2/>

¹⁷ J.D. Greear, "Paul's Tombstone, Acts 20:17-38," <https://summitchurch.com/message/pauls-tombstone-acts-2017-38>

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 4:16

you—Jesus says, “I am the Vine and you are the branches...*apart from me you can do nothing.*”¹⁹ Pastors, if we’re not abiding in Christ, we have nothing to offer this flock. Church, if you’re not abiding in Christ, you have nothing to offer this family.

But if we are abiding in Christ, then look at what we’ve been appointed to. Look at v. 28 pastors—who made us overseers? The *Holy Spirit*. Whose church is it that we care for? The church *of God*. With what did God the Father obtain this church to which he has entrusted us? With the blood of his own Son. That’s the value of this flock in the eyes of the Triune God—worth the blood of Jesus, poured out on the cross, in the place of sinners!²⁰

Now we might look at all this and say it’s too high a calling for us. Too much responsibility. But that’s not Paul’s intention here. We’re not to walk away crushed by this speech, but lifted up—because *the kingdom continues in the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*. I say, “I can’t do this!” God says, “I know, not by *your* power! You are an *undershepherd*, *under* the power of the Triune God.”

²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; Acts 20:29

But what about wolves! When wolves, that is, people who point the flock away from King Jesus, bite one of the sheep—we are to protect the weak *under the power of the Triune God*.²¹

³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Acts 20:30

But what about weird teaching? When wolves are exposed from within the flock itself—we are to correct and discipline *under the power of the Triune God*.²²

³³ I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. Acts 20:33

But what about greed? When jealousy and selfish ambition rises within us—we are to bring order and call for generosity *under the power of the Triune God*.²³

¹⁹ John 15:5

²⁰ Schnabel, Loc 23664

²¹ Marshall, 353; Schnabel, Loc 23689; 2 Timothy 3:16; 4:2; Ezekiel 34:15-16

²² Marshall, 353; Matthew 18:15-20

²³ James 3:14-16

³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. Acts 20:31

But what about burnout? When we grow weary from being constantly vigilant—we are to be strengthened and sustained *under the power of the Triune God*.²⁴

What I'm getting at in all this is basically summed up in v. 32, where Paul says,

³² 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. Acts 20:32

In other words, you're in good hands! You're not in the hands of the wolves; you're really not even in the hands of the shepherds. You're in the hands of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! The Ephesian church always was, but now even more so.²⁵ So Paul says to them and to us, don't you think God and his word are enough to keep this church? To sanctify her, make her more and more like Christ until the day she receives her kingdom inheritance—which is God himself face to face forever?

Earlier we talked about finishing well, but what about letting go well? Can you imagine how hard it would've been for Paul to let go? This is basically what our Blessing identity emphasis is going to be about this Fall: how to let go well.

- Anybody here having a hard time entrusting a leadership responsibility to somebody else?
- Anybody here having a hard time letting go of how you want something to be?
- Anybody here fighting for control over someone you don't want to let go?

You know where so much of our fear and anxiety comes from? From things we have no ability to control, ways we are forced to *let go*. Where is the Triune God saying to you, "Me and the word of my grace, it's sufficient for you"?

Imagine the freedom of being able to joyfully and confidently let go? Perhaps it would look something like this (v. 36):

³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ being

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:58, 16:13; Marshall, 353-354

²⁵ Schnabel, Loc 23752

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 20:36-38

Maybe letting go well won't just be all warm and fuzzy. It might feel like walking into affliction. It might mean a lot of weeping. It might mean saying goodbye to those you love. But you know what it definitely will be? It will be how the kingdom continues.

Conclusion

You know, none of us know when our time will come, when the next words we say might serve as our own farewell speech. The death of an iconic, seemingly invincible person like Kobe Bryant can shake us to the core...make us think about how we're living...make us think about what kind of legacy we would leave behind. The Apostle Paul has laid before us today an even greater example of what it means to leave a legacy, to let God's kingdom come in you in such a way that it continues long after you're gone.

But far greater than any farewell speech ever given—in fact, the only one we are told will last forever²⁶—was that of Jesus Christ. Instead of dropping a mic or taking off to pursue his retirement dreams, the Bible says he “emptied himself...And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”²⁷ There's so much of his farewell speech we could point to this morning. Because he was born to die, pretty much anything he said was his parting words. But the ones I want to point us to this morning—especially in light of Paul describing the church as a flock—they come from John 10, where Jesus said this:

¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... [He says, 'I laid down my life for you; I bought you with my blood—remember this!'] ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd... [He says, 'I didn't just do it for you, but for other lost sheep out there; I want my kingdom to continue through you.] ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.” [In other words, this Trinitarian King is

²⁶ Matthew 24:35

²⁷ Philippians 2:7-8

saying, 'I may be out, but I got you.' To use his literal last words on earth, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."²⁸ **John 10:11, 16, 27-30**

And so I can just hear Samuel and Paul shouting from heaven, 'Don't do wickedly and be swept away with whatever king you're worshipping! Don't turn aside after empty things that cannot deliver! Wanna leave a legacy? Fear and follow King Jesus! Serve him with all your heart! Remember what great things he has done for you! For it has pleased him to make you a people for himself!'²⁹ Let that ring in your ears.

You know, at the end of last year, a year that felt a lot like death, I think I figured out what I would like on my tombstone. It came from a passing comment from a guy I had only seen a couple of times. And he said, "Man, every time I'm around you, I just get more of Jesus." And so there it is—I want my tombstone to just say, "Got Jesus. Helped others get Jesus."

What do you want yours to say?

Communion

On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it, he broke it and said to his disciples, "This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me." He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns." **Today we are announcing that Jesus Christ doesn't have anything written on his tombstone—'cause he's not dead.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to your right. If you're a baptized believer, come and remember who you are and whose you are. If you're a believer but not yet baptized, before coming to the table, we would love to help you first come and declare your faith publicly through baptism. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back to talk and pray with you about any need you have. Let's pray.

²⁸ Matthew 28:20

²⁹ 1 Samuel 12:20-22, 24-25

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