

“Finishing the Race”

- Acts 20 -

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Acts 19 - 1 After the uproar had ceased, Paul called the disciples to himself, embraced them, and departed to go to Macedonia. 2 Now when he had gone over that region and encouraged them with many words, he came to Greece 3 and stayed three months. And when the



Jews plotted against him as he was about to sail to Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. 4 And Sopater of Berea accompanied him to Asia—also Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. 5 These men, going ahead, waited for us at Troas. 6 But we sailed away from Philippi after the Days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days joined them at Troas, where we stayed seven days. 7 Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. 8 There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together. 9 And in a window sat a certain young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep. He was overcome by sleep; and as Paul continued speaking, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. 10 But Paul went down, fell on him, and embracing him said, "Do not trouble yourselves, for his life is in him." 11 Now when he had come up, had broken bread and eaten, and talked a long while, even till daybreak, he departed. 12 And they brought the young man in alive, and they were not a little comforted. 13 Then we went ahead to the ship and sailed to Assos, there intending to take Paul on board; for so he had given orders, intending himself to go on foot. 14 And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene. 15 We sailed from there, and the next day came opposite Chios. The following day we arrived at Samos and stayed at Trogyllium. The next day we came to Miletus. 16 For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost. 17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. 18 And when they had come to him, he said to them: "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, 19 "serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; 20 "how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, 21 "testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. 22 "And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, 23 "except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. 24 "But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. 25 "And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. 26 "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. 28 "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 "Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 "Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. 32 "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. 33 "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. 34 "Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. 35 "I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He 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 Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, 38 sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.

The apostle Paul changed the world as few other men have ever done. He lived in a day before any of the modern conveniences, the things that we see today rather as necessities. He didn't have a computer, a cell phone, or a TV, or other modern tools that supposedly make communication easier. There were no airplanes or cars and paved highways so he had to travel everywhere by foot, donkey, or by ship. To make things even more challenging, he continually had to deal with fierce opposition from both outside and inside the church. For Paul,

Christianity was anything but a “feel good experience.” And yet despite all these oppositions and challenges, after 25-30 years of ministry he was not just still hanging in there but he clearly left a lasting impact on the world, not only for *his* time, but also for *all of time*.

We are naturally drawn to the question of “**How did he do it?**” Certainly one has to weigh in the reality of God’s sovereign work in a man. Paul himself taught us in Romans and 1 Corinthians that God has allotted to each of us various gifts and measures of faith (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12). Even if we’re all faithful to the Lord, we will all experience differing results in our lives and our ministries. Yet we can certainly learn from the apostle the biblical principles that governed his ministry and seek to apply them to our own lives, to our gifts and callings that God gives us. I believe that at the heart of Paul’s strategy was his unswerving commitment not only to God, but to his calling and to the people in his life. Surrender was not option. Giving up was not an option. He had “burned his ships.”

Paul in chapter 20 was in the midst of his third missionary journey. His heart was so strong toward those he ministered to and with, that before he departed, he called them to him and “embraced them.” There is no doubt that it would have been very easy for Paul to just “settle in” and take a comfortable pastorate in one of these churches. For he loved them and it was obvious that they loved him. But Paul was “*purposed in the Spirit.*” He knew in his heart what he was called to do, and despite his certain fear as well as his knowledge that he was *...in his own summation*, the “chief of sinners,” he kept on with the mission that he was called to.

We must constantly bear in mind that the enemy does not surrender once we are saved. In truth, the battle just heats up. Thus, we must continue to learn, mature and grow stronger, and yes, *fall down some along the way*. Paul was not done yet. It would be a race to the finish, and like all of us, Satan would try to see to it that he would not...*that we would not*, finish that race...

Now no one can claim I ever preached so long I killed someone! But Paul is able to claim that dubious distinction! Paul was no doubt like all the rest of us zealous preachers. Having traveled and preached in other countries, I have found that such long “into the night” services are commonplace in non-westernized countries. In this case, as the service ran long, this young man Eutychus, who was sitting in the window sill, fell asleep and tumbled to his death. But Paul wasn’t going to have any of that kind of thing putting a damper on his revival meeting, so he went down and apparently was party to the healing or the resurrection of this young man. Then in classic style, Paul and all those in his company, went on to eat and fellowship through the rest of the night, after which he promptly hit the road!

We have a rare glimpse into the intimate and passionate side of Paul in this chapter. He gives a warning that we all so need to hear today! He herein speaks openly and honestly in what seemed to be intended to be a rather private meeting specifically designed for those who were in the service of the Kingdom. These elders of the church in Ephesus now joined Paul for a moment of soul sharing from the heart of this great evangelist.

Paul in this “sharing” reflects back through what was years of ministry at this point. His words were both an outpouring of his own soul as well as a spiritual directive to those in attendance. He began by honestly pointing out to them that his life has always matched his words. He did not live his life saying one thing and doing another. He was faithful, consistent, and committed. He did not paint a picture of an easy road, nor did he pretend that it would be any different for them. He said he had “*served the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials...and endured the oft scheming and plotting by those who claimed to be of God.*” It is a reality that all servants of God will come to know.

Paul says that in his ministry he “*kept nothing back.*” Meaning that he preached the truth—*all of the truth*—no matter how difficult it might have been to swallow or the ramifications of speaking that truth. He didn’t just preach the stuff that would make him popular or the stuff that people wanted to hear. Paul knew what it meant to be “*purposed* in the Spirit” and he knew what it meant to be “*bound* by the Spirit.” The latter being situations where he apparently felt that he “had no choice.” It was a compelling by the Spirit of God that moved Paul to obedience, even though nothing but trials and difficulties and *even imprisonment* was all that was promised him. “*But none of these things move me...*”

For Paul there was no other direction than forward. Such a fact is laudable in an age such as ours where so many in fact do “go back.” No matter what lay ahead, he was “bound” by both God and his own passion to embrace his calling. We want to believe that Paul was cut from another bolt of cloth than we are...that he was “special” in some way. But that is an easy escape from the corporate call to discipleship and service for all redeemed believers.

Paul was committed to “finishing well.” In 2 Timothy 4:7, Paul’s “swan song,” he records, “*I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.*” It was so important for Paul to both live out his calling and to complete his mission. He says that if he did that, he could finish “*with joy.*” Can you imagine that? The shipwrecks, the beatings, the imprisonments, and yet he still is finishing his life with joy? What a contrast with those who have been believers for years and have never matured spiritually, never moved to find and fulfill their place within the body, never learned to serve and contribute. Those who are never “all in.”

So many begin this race but fail to finish it. Many folks are spiritual “sprinters”...meaning they ran fast and hard, they just failed to endure to finish the race. For Christianity is not a sprint but a marathon! And because it is, many finally just fall away from exhaustion, and pass the remainder of their days often bitter and angry, often basking in self-pity. Usually seeking a scapegoat for which to blame for their past and their failures and never looking into the mirror. Hebrews 12 tells us that we must “*run with endurance the race that is set before us...*”

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 says “*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*”

What is the secret ...*if there is one...* of success then for us in this matter? Isaiah 40:31 “*But those who trust in the LORD (or “wait” on the Lord) will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.*”

There are difficulties in life that overwhelm the strongest of people, fears that gnaw at the stoutest of human hearts and young men and women who grow faint and weary. They stumble and fall because they rely on their own inner strength and human resources, which are not a sufficient shield in the storms of life. Only power from above is sufficient to sustain us. Only His protective hand can shelter us from the storms of life and not our own limited human abilities and strength. We are in a time where the pressures of life and the flesh are taking record numbers of people out of the faith and I expect that number to increase in both frequency and magnitude. Satan is quite simply taking people out of what was obviously a novice experience or a marginal interest, and God is letting it happen. The fact is, some of you just aren’t going to make it. Perhaps you are half out the door even this morning. Perhaps that is what this whole pandemic is all about. It is a weeding. A culling. A clarifying event.

Waiting...*trusting*, is actively expecting God to work. Waiting in this case involves activity...involvement, position, and movement. The word "wait" in the King James means "to *look* for, to *hope*, to *expect*. It contains the meaning of "being collected...holding it together." Are you "collected" today? Do you have it together?

The one thing we must know is that it is God who does the actual holding...the actual maintaining. It is not a matter of pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps, but rather leaning on Christ like never before. Thus it is ours to simply walk, live, breath and worship just as close to him as we can get. Because in our case, we are indeed "riding His coattails." That's the point that Isaiah is making and that is the point that Paul is making. The key to endurance is to stay close to Him. Prayer, scripture quiet time, discipline of living, priority of devotion, faithfulness in thanksgiving, and active serving and loving of your brethren. If survival is in the future for you, you must get closer too God than you have ever been. You must pull your foot out from the door and dig in.

Paul says that his "hands were clean" as to the lives of those of whom he was called. He preached the "whole" counsel of God, again, meaning **he taught it all!** The grace, the demands of obedience and holiness, the meat and the potatoes! He did not leave anything out in an attempt to build a big church or to be popular. He did not flinch at controversy and he certainly did not back away from adversity! He did not pander to the emotions or to the reimagining of Christianity as we so often see in our day. He was a true minister of God.

Paul knew and acknowledged that the enemies of Christ were "out there," and they were coming for the church. Such attacks were not only going to come from the outside, from those in the unredeemed communities, but from the "wolves" who would manage to make it even into the fold, into the church, and, if allowed, they would destroy the sheep. Paul warned that these folks would literally come from "among yourselves," meaning from within the church. There would be men who would rise up from the inside and would cause division within the body, with the ultimate purpose of easing their consciences and effectively gaining followers to their brand of thinking. They will speak distorted and perverse lies in attempt to cause division within the church. They need someone to blame. Someone who caused them to not finish the race. Someone who stole their blue ribbon and robbed them of their trophy. And it surely it has to be someone other than themselves.

Paul warns these believers to be watchful. I cannot reiterate that warning strong enough! These are dangerous times, and unless you are fully vested you are in grave danger today. As a church we are scripturally given explicit directions as to how to handle these individuals...these wolves. We are at war, and there will be casualties.

Paul is herein essentially turning these leaders over to the hand of God. Not that it was ever really anything else, but Paul knew that he was soon no longer going to be around to carry them or coach them. The years of aging and the brevity of life was going to catch up with him, and he instinctively seemed to know this. It was never about position or power...and it certainly was never about the money. He willingly worked off and on during his whole life so that he might be able to minister the gospel. What a different mentality than that which we see today in an atmosphere of "hirelings" and "ministerial vocations." He was more concerned with *giving* to support the work than ever *receiving* anything from the church!

In the end, Paul leaves them with the only thing that he could...*a prayer*. Yes, there was sorrow by all, not knowing what lay ahead for any of them, but Paul knew all he needed to know; he was "on a mission from God." Not a mission to Jerusalem, but a mission to finish well. That meant following through with his calling, even if it meant they had to do so without him beside them. Paul was clearly telling these boys that it was time to man up. They would now need to step up and be the men God was calling them to be. No more messing around. This was it. This was the "final stretch." Matthew 24:13 reminds us "**But the one who endures to the end will be saved.**"