

Delivered
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Acts 20:22-35

Eighteen years ago this month, Susan and I were toiling with the decision to move to Atlanta. Our life had been in Greenville for many years. We were very active in our church. Yet, we felt God was calling us to a new adventure here.

Think about a time when you've moved on to a new season in life or ministry. **What happened with the relationships and friendships you left? How did you feel? Looking back, what things of value remain from your time there?**

- Goodbyes can be hard. In this morning's text we see Paul saying goodbye to the elders of the church he founded in Ephesus.
- To give you some context, Paul spent about three years with this church.
- As their founding pastor he had poured into their lives in a major way.
- Now the Holy Spirit has made it clear this was Paul's last goodbye.
- He's on his way to Jerusalem and he's in a hurry because he wants to celebrate Pentecost there.
- He's in such a hurry that he sailed past Ephesus because stopping there with so many friends would have delayed him. Instead, he stops in Miletus and sends word for the elders of the church at Ephesus to come to him.
- He knows he'll never lay eyes on them again so he reviews the past and gives them a "pep talk" for the future.
- BIG IDEA: Looking back on seasons of serving God we see that sharing the gospel and making disciples comes with hardship and challenges, but it is worth all the sacrifice and effort.
- Let's pick up the story in verse 22:

Acts 20:22–35 (ESV)

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.'

- The Holy Spirit impressed on Paul he was to go to Jerusalem.
How do we discern the leading of the Holy Spirit?
- Paul had no idea how it would unfold, but he knew it would be bad (chains, persecution.) Would you have run the other way?
- Verse 24: **How did Paul respond to his frightening future? What motivated him to face the unpleasant things to come? What things in his past might have prepared him for this? (2 Corinthians 11:24–30)**
- The key words in verse 24 are: “none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear.” In the NLT: “...*my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.*”

- I'm convicted when I read Paul's words because the facts prove they were not just words. He ultimately died a martyr's death for the gospel, and I whine if someone said something unkind to me or the coffee was cold.
- Verse 24 in the KJV/NKJV: "...so that I may finish my race with joy..."ⁱ
- Paul didn't say, "I run my race with gritted teeth." He said, "I run my race with JOY!" I need to learn how to do that! How about you?
- Paul liked to use the example, the metaphor of running a race:
 - 1 Corinthians 9:24 (NLT) ...in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win!
 - Galatians 5:7 (NLT) You were running the race so well. Who has held you back from following the truth?
 - Philippians 2:16 (NLT) Hold firmly to the word of life; then, on the day of Christ's return, I will be proud that I did not run the race in vain and that my work was not useless.
 - Philippians 3:14 (NLT) I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.
 - 2 Timothy 4:7–8 (NLT) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. ⁸ And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his appearing.
- **How can we run the Christian race with JOY even when it's hard? What was so motivating that it caused Paul to "count it all joy?"**
- We don't know who wrote the book of Hebrews, but the author answers our question about how to run the Christian race with joy:

Hebrews 12:1–2 (ESV)

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith...

- To win the Christian race we need to “run light.” We need to throw off anything that is a distraction and especially any sin that weighs us down.
- To win the Christian race we need to ENDURE – keep pressing on even when there are hardships and pain.
- To win the Christian race we need to keep our focus on Jesus and run the race in the power of His Spirit living in us instead of trying to do it in our own power.
- Jesus himself taught Paul (and us) that it was, *“for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*
- That’s how we can run and win the Christian race with joy.
- In verses 26-27 Paul reviewed his own performance in ministry.
- He said that since he would not see them again, he wanted to be clear: *“I have been faithful. If anyone suffers eternal death, it’s not my fault, ²⁷ for I didn’t shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know.”ⁱⁱ*
- Paul said, *“I was faithful and I told you everything you needed to know to be saved, my conscience is clear and my hands are clean!”*
- Any serious Bible teacher should desire to be able to say that to people.
- Those words are not just for preachers and teachers. **How might you and I be convicted personally by Paul’s statement in verses 26 and 27?**
- I’m convicted to ask: Have I told everyone I have relationship with about the gospel. Can I say my conscience is clear and my hands are clean?
- Beginning in verse 28, Paul gave a warning to these church leaders: Guard yourselves and God’s people. Just like a shepherd with a flock, church leaders need to feed and protect the sheep; because these are expensive sheep, Jesus paid for them with His own blood!
- Who is trying to destroy the sheep Jesus paid for? Wolves – false teachers. Paul knew that once he wasn’t on the scene keeping a watchful eye on the doctrine, false teachers (wolves) would be working hard to lead God’s people astray for their own purposes.

- Some of these wolves would look like church members and pastors. Jesus warned, ¹⁵ *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”*ⁱⁱ
- Lesson: Whether you are an elder in the church, or just a conscientious Bible student, we all need to be discerning about whose teaching we trust.
- Verse 33: Finally, Paul reminds them his ministry to this church was never about getting rich. Paul never took a dime from this church. Now, he did receive support in other situations; but in Ephesus he paid his own way by tent making. He did this as an example to them so that these leaders would also sacrifice their own resources to support this church.
- Then he quotes Jesus: *“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”* By the way, you won’t find anywhere in the gospels that Jesus said that, but we all know it’s consistent with who Jesus is. Clearly someone quoted Jesus to Paul on that subject of the blessings of giving for the work of Christ.
- Lesson: God’s work will require sacrifice, and it’s more than worth it!
- Verses 36-38: Paul prayed with them; they cried, embraced, and kissed him good-bye; then they walked him to the ship. Goodbyes are hard.

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- Life and ministry are a series of seasons. When a page turns and God calls us to a new place of ministry, it’s good to look back as we leave.
- Paul has given us a wonderful example of how to work for Christ today so one day we can look back with a clear conscience as we move on.
- Paul convicted us of a couple of things:
 - Paul endured incredible hardships even dying as a martyr in order to share the gospel. How wimpy for most of us to whine about little slights and inconveniences when we are telling others about Jesus.
 - Paul also convicts me when he says his conscience was clear that he had told everyone in his sphere of influence

about Jesus and the message of the gospel. Certainly I know I have fallen short there.

- Paul also warns us about false teachers (wolves.) Whether you are an elder in the church, or just a conscientious Bible student, we all need to be discerning about whose teaching we trust.
- Paul quoted Jesus in teaching us that it is more “*blessed to give than to receive.*” God’s work will require sacrifice, and it’s more than worth it!
- Finally, Paul teaches us that we can run and WIN the Christian life with JOY! His motivation was the joy of knowing that every time he shared the gospel with someone, he had done his part. Sadly, not everyone we tell about Jesus will trust Him for eternal life; but our job isn’t saving people, it’s showing them how they CAN be saved. We can rejoice in that fact!
- Looking back on seasons of serving God we see that sharing the gospel and making disciples comes with hardship and challenges, but it is worth all the sacrifice and effort.

ⁱ *The New King James Version.* (1982). (Ac 20:24). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

ⁱⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Ac 20:26–27). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2016). (Mt 7:15). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.