

33. Start well, finish well

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Imagine that you are running a race that is ten laps long . And let's just say that you are in first place for nine of those ten laps. Not only are you in first, but you are just creaming the competition because your competitors are still at the fourth lap. So when you are about to run the tenth lap, you are thinking , "What's the point? I'm obviously the winner here. I'm gonna go over there and sit and watch the rest of the guy's running." Guess what? You don't get first place, second place, or even an honorable mention. You are disqualified because you didn't finish the race.

In the same way, it isn't enough for you to do well in the first five years or the next twenty years of your Christian life. You have to cross the finish line. Unfortunately I know many Christians who walked away from the Lord in the middle of their spiritual races. We call them 'backsliders.' Some of them are former pastors. They disqualified themselves because they couldn't control their fleshly desires. As I mentioned this, you may think about someone particular who fits in this category . I am sure that they all have some lame excuses why they have backslidden, but they are excuses. They chose to disqualify themselves and not finish well.

Apostle Paul was preparing himself to go to Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost according to the Lord's command and to get arrested there. Did he know that? Of course, the Lord told him. But Paul was determined to follow the Lord regardless.

But before he headed out to Jerusalem, he wanted to spend a little bit of time with the church leaders of Ephesus where he spent 3 years and poured out his heart to them with wisdom and insight of pastoral ministry and encouraged them to stay in the course.

A. FROM TROAS TO MILETUS

Acts 20:13-16 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.

Paul chose to walk from Troas to Assos, a distance of about twenty miles. Average people walk about 2 miles per hour, so Paul could probably get there in ten hours or so. But if Paul went along with the rest of the team by ship, it would take a day or more to get to Assos from Troas. This enabled him to stay a little longer with the believers in Troas.

Besides, Paul probably wanted time alone to commune with the Lord about his trip to Jerusalem. The apostle must have sensed already that difficult days lay ahead of him. He may also have been pondering the message he would give to the Ephesian elders.

There were fifty days between Passover and Pentecost, and Paul's trip from Philippi to Troas had already consumed 12 days. It took another four days to get to Miletus, so Paul decided not to go to Ephesus, otherwise he would lose more valuable time.

Instead, he invited the leaders of the Ephesian church to travel about thirty miles and meet him at Miletus, where the ship was waiting to unload cargo and take on more. Paul was not one to waste time or to lose opportunities.

B. HOW PAUL LIVED IN EPHEBUS

Acts 20:17-21 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.

Most of the time in Acts, we see Paul the evangelist. But here in Acts 20, we get a unique picture of Paul the pastor – what was important to him as a leader and shepherd of God's people. What he told them here gives us a glimpse of how Paul ministered in Ephesus.

There are three parts to Paul's farewell message:

1) He reviewed the past – Acts 20:17-21

Paul emphasized his faithfulness to the Lord and to the church as he ministered in Ephesus.

2) He discussed the present – Acts 20:22-27

Paul revealed his personal feelings in view of both the past and the future.

3) He spoke about the future – Acts 20:28-35

Paul warned them of the dangers that the churches faced.

Since we don't have enough time to cover all of these, we cover what we can today .

Let's dissect Paul's ministry in detail and compare it with others.

1) The manner of his ministry was exemplary with openness and humility – v18-19a

Paul lived a consistent life which anybody could inspect, because he had nothing to hide. He served in humility, not like many Christian TV evangelists and celebrities.

2) Paul had actual threats against him by the Jews – v19b

Paul faced many physical threats against him day in and day out. Those things did not stop him, rather made him to push God's truth more. Was he not fearful as a human? Of course, he was, rather he turned to the Lord instead of trying to solve the situations with his own power.

We are 21st century Christians. Some of us are Christians only because it is convenient and pleasant and because it is not costing us anything . But here is the truth, whether we like it or not: the average evangelical Christian who claims to be born-again and have eternal life is not doing as much to share his or her faith as the busy followers of the cults handing out their papers on the street corners and visiting from house to house on Saturdays.

We are not willing to take the spit and the contempt and the abuses those cultists take as they knock on doors and try to persuade everyone to follow them in their

mistaken beliefs. The cultists can teach us much about zeal and effort and sacrifice, but most of us do not want to get that serious about our faith or our Savior .

3) Paul kept nothing that was helpful to the people. – v20-21

When it comes to the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul held back nothing that was profitable to them. He declared the whole counsel of God. His was a balanced message that included the doctrines and applications, as well as the privileges and responsibilities, that belonged to the Christian life. In his preaching , he neither compromised nor went to extremes, but kept things in balance. Paul also kept his outlook and congregation balanced, witnessing both to Jews and to Gentiles.

It is most unfortunate that some pastors are only concerned about their church congregation numbers and church income so much that they choose to keep the truth of God's Word back that is helpful to the believers, because they don't want to offend their congregation because of their sins. For cult leaders, they have problems with God in what they teach; but for those church pastors, they have problems with God in what they do not teach.

Believers have to ask themselves as they are leaving their church after the service, "Did the Holy Spirit convict me and prompt me to follow Jesus closer than before through today's sermon?" If they were not challenged or convicted, but only made them feel good about whatever they were doing , their pastors were not giving them what is profitable for their spirit in Jesus.

C. WHAT PAUL IS FACING NOW

Acts 20:22-24 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.

The phrase "And see, now" shifts the emphasis from the past to the present as Paul opens his heart and tells his friends just how he feels. He did not hide from them the fact that he was prompted to go to Jerusalem by the Holy Spirit 's leading, even though he knew that danger and possible death awaited him there. A lesser man would have found some way to bail out, but not Paul. He was too gripped by his calling and his devotion to Jesus Christ to look for some safe and easy way out.

I love what Paul said in v24. He was least bit concerned about his life or what might happen in Jerusalem, but rather he concentrated himself to finish his spiritual race with joy to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God.

In running to win in our spiritual race, we need to understand who our competitors are. I am not competing with you, nor are you competing with me. Our real enemies are the world, our own fleshly desires, and the devil. They are what we are trying to overcome. While we run toward the finish line, our enemies throw obstacles, temptations, confusions, and other tricks in front of us to slow us down and eventually take us out of the race.

Coming in 2nd, 3rd, or even last place in a race might be OK in elementary school to cheer our children, but not in the spiritual race that we are in. You know what they say, "The 2nd place runner is the fastest loser." Because in the spiritual race, either

we win or lose. That means that either we live our lives for God or we live for evil and our carnal desires. It doesn't matter how well we start our Christian life. What really matters is how well we finish our lives for the Lord. It sounds awfully harsh, but that is the spiritual reality without any sugarcoating.

1 Corinthians 9:24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.

Then, some of you might say, "Preacher, I made some bad choices in my life and I walked away from the Lord. Does it mean that my race is done and over?"

Sometimes, due to poor choices in friends and companions or our own flat out dumb decisions, we get "off track." They tend to drag us away from our commitment, instead of encouraging us in it. At the very least, they slow us down. At worst, they sidetrack us. The best thing for us to do as believers in the Lord is, first, to ask the Lord to forgive you from your sins and ask Him to help you keep moving forward in our faith, and don't let the past or Satan's reminders of our past trip us up.

Philippians 3:13-14 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Speaking of getting off track, King Saul of the OT is a good example. When prophet Samuel pointed him out to the people of Israel, Saul showed humility though he had everything going for him – he was tall, dark, and handsome. He had charisma, charm, and even anointed by God to be the king of Israel. He would have been a good politician, I might add. Saul had incredible potential.

If he had just obeyed the Lord and not read his own Twitter and self-blogs so much, it would have been great. But he disobeyed the Lord repeatedly and allowed pride, and eventually paranoia and jealousy, to consume him. This led to a series of sins, causing God to reject him.

The once-great King Saul met a tragic end at the battlefield saying, in his own words, "Indeed I have played the fool and erred exceedingly," in 1 Samuel 26. In the end, he really had no one to blame but himself. He started his race well, but his finish was a disaster.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Win your spiritual race. Don't ever settle for mediocrity as a follower of Jesus.

This is not government work that you can settle for "Good enough", because you are running for Jesus and for His glory.

2) To win your spiritual race, there will be a cost for us – giving up our selfish carnal desires. It's worth it for the glory of the Lord Jesus.