



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

Paul's Third Missionary Journey, Part 5

Paul's Journey Back to Jerusalem, Part 2

Acts 20:17-27

March 2, 2008

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- ❖ Recently, I was introduced to a book that has truly caused me to think. It is *Future Grace*, by John Piper. In it, Piper draws a contrast between attempting to live a fruitful Christian life based upon gratitude for what God has *already done for us* versus a life of *faith in God's future grace*. Essentially, the book is a defense of the latter. In the first chapter, Piper makes several interesting statements:

Faith in future grace, not gratitude, is the missing ethical power to overcome rebellion and motivate obedience. Just when today's Christian would probably say the problem is a lack of gratitude, the biblical writers again and again say the problem is a lack of faith in God's future grace. Moses rebukes the people, 'You saw how the Lord your God carried you just as a man carries his son...but for all this you did not trust the Lord your God' (Deuteronomy 1:31-32).

It's true that the disobedient people in Scripture must have lacked gratitude. But that's not how the Bible explains their rebellion and disobedience. Repeatedly the explanation given is lack of faith in God's future grace. The missing channel of motivating power between past grace and future obedience was not past-oriented gratitude, but future-oriented faith.

- ❖ As we examine Chapter 20, we will do so in light of Paul's words to the Philippians in **Philippians 3:13-14**, "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."
- ❖ In this passage, Paul admonishes the people of God to do two things: (1) forget what lies behind; and (2) look forward to what lies ahead.
- ❖ This week, we will focus on how Paul fulfilled these words by "looking forward to what lies ahead."

- ❑ This is the only speech in Acts where the speaker addresses a Christian audience. The other speeches have been evangelistic – whether preached to Jews (2:14; 3:12; 13:16) or Gentiles (10:34; 14:14; 17:22) – or legal defenses – whether before the Sanhedrin (4:8; 5:29; 7:1) or the five speeches before the Jewish and Roman authorities (Chapters 22-26).
- ❑ Consequently, it is a speech that is supremely applicable to Christians throughout all ages, not just the first century apostolic era.
- ❑ Furthermore, it is quite likely that Luke was present during this message by the Apostle Paul, making this a first-hand account of the speech. One scholar, William Neil, even speculates, "Luke may have made notes at the time."
- ❑ Finally, there seems to be little doubt, even among the more liberal scholars, that Paul actually gave this speech. The reason for this was because the points of the speech are distinctively Pauline – points that he also emphasizes in his epistles.
 - Such points include the **grace of God** (24, 32); the **kingdom of God** (25); the **purpose of God** (27); the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ (28), the **necessity of repentance and faith** (21); the **church of God and its edification** (28, 32); the **inevitability of suffering** (23-24); the danger of false teachers (29-30) the **need for vigilance** (28, 31); **running the race** (24); and **our final inheritance** (32).

- ❑ In **Verse 25** of this passage, the Apostle Paul states, "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again."

- This Verse is significant in establishing the context of this speech. The Apostle Paul is making a farewell speech. Certainly, he is imparting to the Ephesian elders the most significant truths that he wants to leave them with.

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- Luke begins this section, writing, in **Verse 17**, “From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.”
 - Paul’s summoning of the elders from Ephesus indicates that during his stay in that city, Paul had established not only the church there, but he had established the leadership structure as well.
 - The “straight-line” distance from Ephesus to Miletus was about 30 miles; however, the actual traveling distance would have been longer. Therefore, it would have taken a messenger, likely between three to five days [depending upon the weather and the route] to return to Miletus with the Ephesian elders.

I. Paul Appeals to His Past Example

- In **Verse 18**, Luke writes, “When they [the Ephesian elders] 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.’”
 - False teachers often attempted to destroy the work that Paul had done [2 Corinthians 10:1-12; 11:1; Galatians 1:6-9; 3:1; 5:12; Philippians 3:2].

John Stott writes, “A vicious smear campaign had been launched against Paul in Thessalonica. Because he had had to be smuggled out of the city by night and had not returned, his critics accused him of insincerity. Something similar seems to have happened in Ephesus during the year or so since he had left the city. So he needed to defend the sincerity of his motives and, as in Thessalonica so in Ephesus, he did it by reminding them of his visit.”

- Consequently, Paul sought to establish his sincerity by appealing to his past example during the three years he stayed in Ephesus.
- Paul will later write a similar message to the Thessalonians: 1 Thessalonians 1:5c, “...just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”
- These words reveal the essence of Paul’s leadership style – leading by example.
- In **John 13:15**, Jesus states, “I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.”

- The Apostle Paul echoes these words in 1 Corinthians 4:16, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, and 1 Timothy 4:12.

□ As Paul appeals to his past example, he makes several points: (a) his **humble service** among the Ephesians; (b) his severe testing by the Jews; (c) his **bold proclamation of the Gospel** among them; (d) his **open proclamation of the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles**; and (e) his **faithful and complete proclamation of the Gospel** among them.

- Once again, as this is the only speech in Acts addressed to a Christian audience, these points demonstrate the apostolic model by which we should pattern our lives as well.

a. He Humbly Served Among the Ephesians

- Paul continues, in **Verse 19**, “I served the Lord with great humility and with tears...”
 - At the heart of Paul’s service was humility. He was not seeking his own, selfish gain. He was not seeking to be “rich and famous.” Rather, he was seeking to (1) Love the LORD; and (2) Love people. This was his motivation
 - Paul never sought the glory of men, but of God.
 - 1 Thessalonians 2:6-7, “...nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.”
 - In his Epistle to the Philippian Church, Paul states this truth.
 - Philippians 2:3, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;”
 - Yet, in the context, here, a life of humility simply follows the pattern of Christ:
 - Philippians 2:8, “Being found in appearance as a man, He [Christ] humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

b. He was Severely Tested by the Jews

- Paul then adds, **Verse 19b**, “...although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews.”
 - Throughout his ministry, the Apostle Paul continually faced opposition from his fellow Jews [2 Corinthians 11:24, 26].

- In Acts 9:23, after Paul declared Jesus as the Son of God, “the Jews plotted together to do away with him.” On the island of Cyprus Paul faced opposition from the false prophet Bar-Jesus (Acts 13:6). He also faced fierce opposition at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:45); Iconium (14:2), Lystra (14:19), Thessalonica (17:5), Berea (17:13), Corinth (18:6, 12-13), and Ephesus (19:9).
- Hardship and suffering seemed to be the hallmark of Paul’s ministry:
 - Acts 19:9, “But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he [Paul] withdrew from them and took away the disciples...”
 - Acts 20:3, “...and when a plot was formed against him [Paul] by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia.”
 - 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15, “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did for the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out.”
 - 2 Corinthians 2:4, “for out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.”
- What a blessing, Paul is no longer tethered to or rooted in this world. He has been “uprooted” so that his contentedness is no longer to be found in the things of this world, but rather, in God Himself.
- Read Acts 14:22, “[Paul was] strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.’”
- In Galatians 6:17 Paul writes: ‘From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.’
- Certainly, here, the ‘brand-marks’ to which Paul is referring are, those physical scars that he received while proclaiming the truth of the Gospel during his travels.
- Regardless of the actual background, the ‘brand-marks’, or the *stigmata*, which Paul received here in Lystra, serve as a personal identification with Jesus Christ, his Lord and Master. As one scholar [Robert Fung] writes, **‘They are marks called the marks ‘of Jesus’ not only as a sign of ownership, nor merely because they were incurred on account of Jesus’ name, but probably also because they gave palpable proof that Paul was suffering with his Lord (Romans 8:17; 2 Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10)...’**

- ❑ There is a common axiom that says: ‘No cross, no crown...’ Indeed, this was true for the Apostle Paul and for every believer who seeks to live a life that emulates the Lord [John 16:33; 2 Timothy 2:3; 3:12; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 5:10].
- ❑ As C.K. Barrett writes, ‘[Luke] makes it clear that the road his heroes were traveling was the way of the cross.’
- ❑ In his letters to the young Timothy, the Apostle Paul makes this point quite clear:
 - 2 Timothy 2:3: ‘Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.’
 - Read also 2 Timothy 3:10-17
- ❑ It seems that the modern preacher often sees such words as unnecessary, depressing, and potentially ‘turn off’ to ‘perspective’ believers. Yet, for Paul, it was not only a reality, but, indeed the source of great joy, that he would be deemed worthy to be so closely associated with his Lord that he would suffer as His Lord did.
- ❑ Not only this, but **throughout the Scriptures** it is quite clear that salvation ‘entering into the kingdom of God’ is **always** preceded by tribulations. Such was the case in the in the Old Testament in the life of Joseph, in the Passover and Exodus, and in the return from Babylonian captivity. Yet, it finds its supreme fulfillment in the trials, suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ❑ Paul’s inclusion of the details of his suffering is quite refreshing. Not only do his accounts serve to strengthen and encourage modern believers in their times of sufferings, but in reveals the authenticity of Paul and his message.
- ❑ As a Pastor, I often speak with individuals who continually question why they are struggling in life, believing that if they were in some way more “Christ-like” that their sufferings would cease. However, the words of Paul [and the words of Christ Himself] destroy such unbiblical notions.
- ❑ Yet, it is also quite interesting that so many of the sufferings of Paul, and the ones he emphasizes, have to do with his **rejection** by his fellow-countrymen. It seems that, like today, rejection by “our own” is the most painful form of suffering one could face. This is why Paul emphasizes that he was severely tested *by the Jews*.

❑ **It may seem that such opposition was reason to pity Paul; however, it only strengthened his reliance upon the Holy Spirit and his conviction that he was to do all things as unto God, not men (Colossians 3:23). Consequently, it was, in a very real sense, God’s means of “uprooting” Paul from the trappings of this world – at least from the pursuit of the praise of men.**

c. He Boldly Proclaimed the Gospel Among Them

- Luke records, in **Verse 20**, Paul stating, “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.”
- Paul is not ashamed of the Gospel or afraid of persecution. He is bold. He is not afraid of the persecution that will inevitably result from his proclamation of the Gospel.
 - This is one of the great blessings that results from our suffering for Christ. We no longer fear the persecution and rejection that comes from men. We are, once again, “uprooted” and freed from such fear and bondage.
 - **Proverbs 29:25** states, “The fear of man brings a snare, But he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted.”

d. He Openly Proclaimed the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles

- Then, in **Verse 21**, “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”
 - Christianity is not a “religion” that is bound by cultural or ethnic norms. It transcends them. In other words, there is not a nationality or group of people that are in any way “more Christian” – or “more favored” by God than others. However, in virtually every other religion in the world, the purist expression each of these religions is bound to one particular culture, language, or nationality. Yet, one need not reject his or her cultural nuances before [or after] embracing Christ as Savior. We do not have to first become Jewish before embracing Christ. This is yet another application of the truth that He is the Savior of the whole world – without distinction of race, ethnicity or culture.
 - Every individual in the world is saved in the same manner – by repentance of sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It does not matter who you are, what your background is, what your I.Q. level is, or how much money you have.

The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the “great equalizer.”

- Not only must we understand that all men – without exception – are saved through repentance and faith; but, that faith and repentance themselves are **both** gifts from God Himself. This reality preserves the truth that our salvation is *wholly* and act of God’s grace – a truth Paul so often emphasizes.
 - **Repentance is a gift** [Acts 5:31; Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25]
 - **Faith is a gift** [Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 1:29; Ephesians 6:3 where Paul prays for “faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” therefore, indicating that it is a gift – i.e. something *given* by God. Peter, also, writes concerning believers who have “*received* a faith as precious as ours” (2 Peter 1:1)].

The saving power of faith resides thus not in itself, but in the Almighty Savior on whom it rests. It is never on account of its formal nature as a psychic [spiritual] act that faith is conceived in Scripture to be saving, - as if this frame of mind or attitude of heart were itself a virtue with claims on God for reward...It is not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ...**It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith.** B.B. Warfield

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- ❑ Yet, it is essential that we never confuse remorse [as with Judas (Matthew 27:3) or Saul (1 Samuel 15:24-25)] with true repentance. Repentance involves, not merely feeling sorry for because of one's action, but pursuing a course of change that involves action. Typically, remorse involves one feeling sorry he was caught, whereas repentance involve one being sorry for his sin.
- ❑ Finally, an understanding of faith and repentance demonstrates that conversion involves both an affirmation and a denial. Both Jews and Gentiles need to hear the same message – we are to repentant *of our sins* [Denial] and believe *in the Lord Jesus Christ* [Affirmation].
- ❑ Just as change requires a specific object, so does our faith. Simply “having faith” is never sufficient. We are to place our faith in a specific object – a specific Person – the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

e. He Faithfully Proclaimed the Gospel Among Them

- ❑ Not only was Paul bold and inclusive in his proclamation of the Gospel – but he was **complete**.
- ❑ Paul concludes this portion of his speech, stating, in Verse 27, “For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.”
 - This is, indeed, the Apostolic model of preaching that we must follow today – proclaiming **the whole will of God** – that is, **all** of the Scriptures.
 - This is one of the most significant problems in the modern church. We do not teach the “whole will of God.” Rather, we “pick-and-choose” [“seed-pick” to borrow a Greek expression] those passages we believe are most “**relevant**.”
 - Yet, such an act exists as the height of arrogance. Who are we to determine what is most relevant? Who are we to have the right or authority to determine what passages of Scripture – the revealed will of God – are most important?
 - It is our duty to, as Paul did, **proclaim the whole will of God**.

- As a result of Paul’s faithful and complete proclamation of the will of God, he states, in **Verse 26**, “Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men.”
 - Read **Ezekiel 33:1-5**; and **Ezekiel 3:15-21**.
 - Just as the watchmen, in Ezekiel 33, were innocent of the “blood of men”, so Paul had “done his duty” and was, therefore, innocent of the blood of his hearers who rejected the Gospel message.

II. Paul Focuses on His Future Purpose

- After Paul establishes the sincerity of his motives, he focuses on his future purpose, as a means of encouraging the Ephesian elders.

a. He is Compelled by the Holy Spirit

- Paul states, in **Verse 22**, “And now, I am compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.”
 - It is impossible to read the words of the Apostle Paul and not be struck by the passion with which he lived his life [to the glory of God].
 - Here, he speaks of being “compelled by the Spirit” to “go to Jerusalem.”
 - He is “fixed” on this purpose.
 - This truth parallels one of the most profound statements Luke makes of Jesus Christ, prior to His trials and crucifixion.
 - **Luke 9:51** states, “...he was determined to go to Jerusalem.” The English Standard Version translates this passage: “He set His face to go to Jerusalem.”
- To the astute reader, the parallels, here, between the final stages of Jesus’ ministry and the final stages of Paul’s are inescapable.
- John Stott notes at least seven powerful parallels:
 - 1.) Just like Jesus, Paul traveled to Jerusalem with a group of disciples (Acts 20:4; Luke 10:38);
 - 2.) Just like Jesus, Paul was opposed by hostile Jews who plotted against his life (Acts 20:3, 19; Luke 6:7, 11; 11:53-54; 22:1-2);
 - 3.) Just like Jesus, Paul made or received three successive predictions of his ‘passion’ or sufferings (20:22-23; 21:4, 11; Luke 12:50; 22:19; 23:46); these visions included being handed over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:11; Luke 18:32);

- 4.) Just like Jesus Luke declared his readiness to lay down his life (20:24; 21:13; Luke 12:50; 22:19; 33:46);
 - 5.) Luke Jesus, Luke was determined to complete his ministry and not be deflected from it (20:24; 21:13; Luke 9:51);
 - 6.) Like Jesus he expressed his abandonment to the will of God (21:14; Luke 22:42);
 - 7.) Jesus set His face to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51).
- Luke’s purpose, certainly, in the Book of Acts, is to demonstrate the “closeness” of Paul and Jesus. Paul had purposed to live a life of obedience, being conformed to the image of Christ.
 - Many Christians state that this is their desire as well. However, to “look like Jesus” also involves, as Paul learned, being treated like Christ. This involves passion and resolution. Yet, it also involves suffering.
 - It is these two characteristics that so few modern believers exhibit – passion and the willingness to suffer for Christ’s sake. Yet, because Paul demonstrated both in his life, his influence, for the sake of Christ, is still felt today.

b. He Knows that Hardships Await Him

- Yet, then, Paul says, in **Verse 23**, “I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.”
 - Paul earlier had stated that he did not know what will happen to him in Jerusalem. However, he did know, through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, that prison and hardships are facing him.”
 - The phrase, “prison and hardships” literally means “chains and tribulation.”
 - This revelation, as much as any, reveals the true passion and purpose of the Apostle Paul. Knowing that in every city that he comes to he will face persecution, he still presses on.
 - The Holy Spirit still speaks today through the illumination of the Word of God. Not only this, for those with ears to hear, He says, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” [2 Timothy 3:12]

c. He Seeks to Complete the Task that Christ Gave Him

- Finally, Paul states, in **Verse 24**, “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”
 - This was Paul’s passion – to finish the task...to know Christ...to testify to His grace.
 - **Philippians 3:8**, “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,”
 - **2 Timothy 4:7**, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;”
 - People often ask me, “What is the will of God in my life?” This is a legitimate question, and one that deserves a biblical answer. However, most of us do not exactly like what the Bible says. Yet, it is quite clear. We, like Paul are to “testify to the gospel of God’s grace” – in whatever profession we serve.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10: “Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me – to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

- It is a biblical truth that an understanding of God’s grace almost always occurs in the midst of persecution or suffering.
- Yet, in this suffering, our eyes are fixed **ahead**.
- Once again, as Paul writes in **Philippians 3:13-14**, “Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”
- As the writer of Hebrews states so powerfully:

Hebrews 12:1-3: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

