
Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

R₂L – Resolved to Live: Living Life Without Regrets (Part 3)

Acts 20:13-24

17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. 18 And when they had come to him, he said to them, “You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, 21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. 22 And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. 24 But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

It is always easier to get excited about something than it is to follow through with something. Some of you may have been excited about some New Year’s resolutions you made just about a month ago only to find it difficult to follow through. Just six months ago, we moved our church from the established and safe location of our own building to the temporary and volatile location of meeting in a school. There was much excitement as we started six months ago; and while there is still excitement, I must remind you that we need follow through.

Let me remind you that life is not like a 50-yard dash; it is more like a marathon. And whether you have started New Year’s resolutions; or committed yourself to the ministry of a church, the key is not simply to begin well, but to finish well. Serving the Lord is never an easy task. It interrupts our lives; often it is hit with criticism; and sometimes people just don’t respond to us the way we had hoped. When such things hit, it is easy to have the “throw in the towel” mentality.

It is doubtful that any of us ever intends for this attitude to happen. It just creeps up on us. As we have been studying the farewell address of Paul, we find Paul not wanting the elders in Ephesus to give up and give out. He knew that to live a life without regret meant to stay true and focused on the ministry God gives. Paul’s desire for these men was that they would cross the finish line, not dropping out of the race. What we find here in these verses is Paul’s sharing of the principles that directed his life and his service to God that kept him going to the end. In some of his final words recorded on this earth, Paul said this in 2 Timothy 4:7,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;

These ought to be the words every believer in Christ ought to utter at the end of his or her life. How did Paul stay focused on such a goal? We read of his resolve to the work of God in verse 24 of our text,

But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

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Thus far in Acts 20:13-21 we have seen Paul's resolve to live in the will of God as well as by the Word of God. Beginning in verse 22 and running through the rest of the chapter, we find Paul's resolved to the work of God. This is all fine and well for Paul, but my task is to prove to you that what we see here in Paul's life applies equally to each and every one of us who calls himself a Christian. For calling oneself a Christian is to declare oneself a slave of Christ, in the service of Christ. And our goal ought to be that we could say, “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.*” Do you really want these to be the closing words of your life? Do you have this passion and resolve to complete with work of God so that at the end, and without regret, you may know you have accomplished God's task for you? How can we do this?

From our text we are going to note four biblical truths that governed Paul's life and ought to govern our lives. How did Paul put himself in such a place as to know he had completed God's work? Did you catch what he said there in verse 24, that he did not consider his own life of any value apart from this one thing; that his life might be a solemn testimony of the gospel of God's grace? In other words, if Paul, or you or I would finish the course God has given to us, then our service to the Lord must be put above even life itself. Let me put it you this way,

If you would resolve to do the work of God, you must put the ministry that God has given you even above life itself.

Anything less belies your profession of being a Christian. I know what some of you may be thinking, “Pastor, that's intense. I am not the apostle Paul. I have not been called to full time ministry or to serve on the mission field. I am just an “ordinary” Christian, a student, a housewife, a blue-collar worker; a professional worker.” First off, God forbid that any one of us would every want to be known as an “ordinary” Christian as if there are two categories of believers; the ordinary and the extraordinary. But second, let us note some of the biblical truths from our text that apply to each of us who names the name of Christ. If you would do the work of God and finish your life well, without regret...

1. You must recognize the ministry that God has entrusted to you.

The Bible is very clear on this point, so let there be no mistake; *there is no such thing as a Christian without a ministry!* We have allowed ourselves to think quite wrongly that only the extraordinary, the hyper-committed, the unusually talented people go into “the ministry.” The rest are just ordinary, half-hearted, and untalented volunteers who tinker around with serving the Lord in their spare time. Isn't it easy to think in terms of serving the Lord “in your spare time” as though your time is yours to do what you want rather than what God wants?

It is no small thing that in the Bible, without exception, when the subject of spiritual gifts; those divine enablements to be used for the common good of the body of Christ, are mentioned, the words “each one” or “every” is used (Romans 12:3; 1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 4:7, 16; 1 Peter 4:10). As Peter puts it,

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

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If you are a Christian, you have a gift from God by which you serve Him by serving, or ministering to the church. And here is another potentially unnerving reminder; that each one of us will an accounting before God with regard to the way we used that gift (or gifts) for to accomplish the work God has set before us. Is this Biblical? I would remind you of the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 where Jesus commends the men who put what God had given to them to work and condemned the man who did nothing with what God had given him.

It does not matter whether you are a student, a manager, a housewife, an accountant, an analyst, retired or otherwise, if you are a Christian, then your mindset need to be, “I am in the ministry; the service of God; to build up God’s people and to speak to the lost about Jesus.”

Let me ask you a question that might help drive this home. Who is more like the apostle Paul in their life situation; me the preacher? Or each one of you? I am supported by this church; I make a living through my work in this church; the rest of you do not; you have jobs outside the church. This makes each of you more like Paul than me. Paul had his “secular” job as a tentmaker by which he paid his bills. We tend to think of ministry as a task, an area of service; but in reality, as seen in the life of Paul, ministry; this service to God, was a continual mindset, a way of thinking that permeated everything he did; whether sewing up a tent, or declaring the gospel of God’s grace.

What happens to a person who has a mindset of ministry rather than seeing his or her hour or two at Awana, or singing on the worship team, or setting up the church as “their” ministry? To have the mindset of ministry makes you realize that your whole life, every moment, belongs to God for accomplishing the work of God. At home, you may have a ministry of drawing your spouse or children closer to God; at home you have been given neighbors to declare the truths of Jesus. You are to be full-time ministers, seeking to serve others in practical ways by meeting needs. You are to be full-time ministers who are to be ready to share the gospel with unbelievers or to seek to encourage a believer by listening to his struggles and sharing biblical truths. You minister to others when you pray for them. All of this is full-time ministry.

Let me tell you what your ministry is at its very root; *your ministry is not a focus on self; but a focus on others by being available to God to work through your life to spiritually benefit others.* And here is another thought, you cannot accomplish the work of God, this ministry if you are not aware that as a Christian you are in ministry. For Paul, his life was regarded by him as nothing if he was not busy with the work, the ministry God had given him.

Now some of you may be thinking that you would like to be more involved in ministry, but right now, your life is just too busy for such things. This brings us to our second truth as seen from the mindset of Paul. If you would do the work of God and finish your life well, without regret...

2. You must recognize that you are God’s slave not a volunteer!

The word “slave” seems harsh to us and we tend to like to tone it down by using the word “servant.” But the reality is that we who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ have been transferred from slavery to sin and unrighteousness; to slavery to the Savior and righteousness. A slave has no rights or will of his own, but is at his master’s bidding and call. This makes me grateful for such a loving, benevolent Master as the Lord Jesus Christ.

But did Paul see himself as a volunteer or a slave. Look at verses 22 and 23 again. Paul says that he is “**bound by the Spirit,**” (which means the Holy Spirit has enslaved him). The word “bound” means to be tied, bound with ropes. Figurative it speaks of his servitude to the Lord

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by means of the Spirit. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to him there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testified to him in every city that bonds and afflictions awaited him (20:22-23). That’s heavy! And yet Paul, after twenty plus years of committed service to the Lord, is resolved to go to Jerusalem and do more work for God; foregoing some nice retirement community on the Aegean Sea where he could play golf every day.

If God told me specifically, “Ed, where I have you, where I want you, there will be bonds and afflictions.” I might think, “God, that does not sound like a happy future; what other options are there for me? I would like to choose door number 2!” Paul did not think like this because he did not see himself as a volunteer, but a slave for Jesus. He saw himself as a soldier under the orders of his divine commander. It was the Holy Spirit compelling Paul to go to Jerusalem to share Christ, even though it would mean hardship and trials. Why did Paul go? Because he saw his life as a service, a ministry to God. He was under divine orders and so he obeyed what he believed the Holy Spirit was commanding him to do.

We make a dreadful mistake at church; both leaders and congregants. We speak of needing volunteers to serve Christ in various ministries and so we begin to see our service to Christ as volunteers. Do you see what the problem is with this thinking? The problem is that if you your service as “voluntary” rather than “obligatory”; if you see that you have the option to choose to serve, then you also view yourself as having the option of not serving if what you are doing is not to your liking. Slaves do not have any choice but to serve the master. Back in the sixties and seventies, young men were drafted into the military to serve in Vietnam. Draftees served because they were chosen to serve. They might not have liked the food, or the living quarters, and they might not have liked where they were assigned to go – but go they went because they were under orders. This was Paul’s mindset; not as an apostle; not as a church leader; but simply as a Christian.

Until we see ourselves in this light, our personal ministries as well as the ministries of the church will suffer and the end result is regret. We need to remember that if we have been bought with the blood of Christ, we are Christ’s slaves. We do not get to choose to serve; we are under orders to serve. Sometimes the service will not be pleasant or seem like much fun; but we do not get to choose to quit. We are slaves of Christ; not volunteers of Christ. But there is more; if you would do the work of God and finish your life well, without regret...

3. You must recognize that following Jesus will bring and therefore you must expect hardship.

Paul made an interesting statement there in verse 24 saying, ***But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself...*** Paul had determined from the beginning that if following Christ meant hardship, slander, imprisonment, or even death, so be it! Paul was literally willing to die for Christ. How about you? Are you honestly at a place in your life that you know you would die for Christ? I have always said that I *think* dying for Christ seems a lot easier than actually living for Christ. Paul did both! He was willing to give his very life in service of the Savior who had died for him. When James Calvert was a missionary on the 1800’s who sought to reach the cannibals of the Fiji Islands for Christ. When the captain of the ship learned what Calvert wanted to, he sought to persuade him to turn him back. The captain said, “You will lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go among such savages!” Calvert simply replied, “We died before we came here.” Those faithful missionaries recognized that their lives already belonged to Jesus, by life or by death.

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What a reminder for us! What a needed word! Too often we hear the misguided notion that there are two options for Christians. There is the one option, the most popular one that says, I will go to church when it is convenient; I will give a few dollars in the offering box now and then; I will volunteer my time and service if there is the right ministry that doesn't interfere with my pursuit of living the American dream of accumulating enough money and things to live a comfortable life. In other words, the priority in life, under this option, is to enjoy a comfortable existence with the intent of someday retiring to spend the last 15 years of your life doing all the things you always wanted to do but never could because of kids, work, church or other obligations.

But there is a second, not so popular, but far more biblical option. It's billed as being only for the real go-getters; the fanatics for Christ. These are those who are willing to give up the American dream and any right to their own will in order to serve Jesus. These often live more simple lives, seeking to give time and resources to the Lord's work. Some of these fanatics even leave America entirely to serve Jesus in the most remote and trying of locations, say Northeast India, like the Panjwanis; or in China, like the Parretts. Of course, as a missionary, nobody expects you to live at the same comfort level as the rest of us back home; for if you did, your commitment to serving Christ would be suspect! All the while, the rest of us back home rarely consider if our own commitment to serving Christ is suspect. Too many times, the call to deny yourself daily seems only to practically apply to the missionaries and pastors, but not to the rest of us. This is pure nonsense and nothing but a double standard. Look with me at Mark 8:34-35. Here we read:

34 And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 35 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.”

What is the context? Jesus is speaking to both His disciples as well as to the crowds. Jesus is not calling the people to some super-committed; optional service track. He called anyone who would follow Him to radical, seemingly extreme self-denial, even to the point of death (as **“taking up your cross”** implies); AND, He calls this salvation! Let me say it clearly, every single true follower of Jesus, not just some out there Jesus freaks, but each one of us is called to a total, all-out, lay-down-your-life kind of commitment! Finish this statement, “If Christ be anything; He must be _____ (everything)!”

If you had to rate your commitment to serving Jesus like this on a scale from 1-10, where would you place yourself? Any 6-7's? Any 4-5's. May I remind you how pointed Jesus was regarding His attitude toward those who profess to know Him, but are lukewarm in their commitment? What did He say about such people in Revelation 3:16?¹ He will vomit them out of His mouth. If your commitment to serving Jesus is not pushing up, up, up to the 8, 9, and 10 numbers, you'd better turn up the heat! Jesus demands totally surrender to His will, even if it means hardship or death.

Let me remind you that the Bible clearly states that following Jesus will result in hardship at some level. Praise the Lord that not everyone will be tortured or martyred for Christ, but Paul was clear in 2 Timothy 3:12 when he told Timothy, **“Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ**

¹ Revelation 3:16 - So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit (vomit) you out of My mouth.

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Jesus will be persecuted.” And early in his service to Jesus, how did Paul encouraged the new believers in Galatia in Acts 14:22? He said, **“Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”** Paul reminded the Thessalonians not to be disturbed by their afflictions, because, as he wrote in 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4, **“we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know.”**

Now we have a moral dilemma, do we not? I mean, who, in his or her right mind, would give their life of to Jesus if it means some form of hardship or affliction? Well, what is the option? You could choose to live here and now for yourself and for the pleasures of this world and hope for the best when you stand before God on the day of judgment and endure His wrath against the sin of disbelief in His Son; that Jesus came to take your punishment on the cross and to give you a new heart and His Spirit by which you might live for Him. According to the words of Jesus we read in Mark 8 though, if you try to save your life by living for yourself, you will lose and you will lose big. But if you give your life to serve Jesus and His gospel, that will bring you eternal salvation and joy! These are the words of Jesus, not me!

The blessing of giving your life over to Jesus is that you no longer need to live in the fears and what ifs of the future. Why? Because your future is in His hands. Whatever comes to pass; seemingly good, or even seemingly bad, our times are in God’s hand. The Holy Spirit revealed to Paul that bonds and afflictions awaited him, but nothing more; no specifics. So he lived each day as though it were his last. Beloved, we need to live each day hard and all-out for the Lord, knowing that if He brings trials into our lives, He will also give us the grace to endure. We are to live light of eternity, not for the fleeting pleasures of this life only. The only way to live in light of eternity is to be totally abandoned to Jesus Christ here and now, trusting in Him in every trial that comes your way. God promises joy in this journey.

So, we must recognize that God has given us a ministry; that we are His slaves, not volunteers; indentured to serve Him; and that we are going to endure some kind of hardship by following Christ. There is a fourth truth here. If you would do the work of God and finish your life well, without regret...

4. We must keep the means of finishing well in view: faithfulness to the gospel of the grace of God.

What is the work of God for the believer? Paul said that he must **“testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God”** (20:24). Do not say, “Paul said that as a pastor, preacher, or apostle; it does not apply to me.” No, beloved, Paul said that as a Christian, a witness of Jesus Christ in fulfillment of Acts 1:8. To be sure, not everyone is called to be a preacher or missionary; but every Christian is called to be faithful with whatever gifts God has entrusted to us; that by our lives and words, the gospel of the grace of God is revealed. If our lives and words betray the gospel of God’s grace, we are in some sense guilty of the blood of those who were tainted by our failure. I believe this is in part what Paul meant in verse 26 when he said, “I am innocent of the blood of all men.” He means that his life bore witness to the gospel of God’s grace so that no one would be able to point his finger at Paul in the day of judgment and say, “Why did you never live out what you believe or speak of what you believe to me?”

If we would be innocent of the blood of all men, we must keep the means of finishing well in view; the faithful sharing of the gospel of God’s grace in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the final day, as you stand before the Judge of all the earth, will you hear Him say, “Well done”

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because your life, as God gave you opportunity, and your words bore witness to the gospel of God’s grace?

And what is this gospel of grace? It is the good news that God pardons guilty sinners who trust in Christ. The gospel of grace also reveals some bad news; that bad news being that God eternally damns all who trust in themselves, or their own good works, thereby rejecting, neglecting or marginalizing what Christ did on the cross. But this bad news also needs to be proclaimed; for if people are not convicted about their sin before a holy God, they will not flee to Christ for refuge from God’s wrath.

Jumping just for a moment down to verse 25, notice Paul uses the phrase “**preaching the kingdom**” (20:25). This is in parallel with what we see in verse 24, “**the gospel of the grace of God**” (20:24). The kingdom is the realm where Jesus is Lord and King. And now our lives and words are to bear witness to the lordship of Jesus. This is the only way we will hear the words, “well done” when we cross the finish line, having completed the work of God. Let us keep the means of finishing well in view; faithfulness in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We must recognize that God has called us ministry; that we are to have the mindset of slaves, beloved slaves, but slaves in service to our master; that we will face various trials and hardships if we are sold out to Christ and through it all, to keep our hearts focused on the task of testifying to others of the gospel of the grace of God. Let me close with an apt mini-biography that I hope will call your hearts to greater resolve and commitment to the work of God. It is the story of John Paton.

John G. Paton was born in Scotland in 1824. He was reared in a godly home and came to personal faith in Christ. As a young man, he worked in an inner city mission in Scotland. But the Lord put it upon his heart to go as a missionary to the fierce cannibals of the New Hebrides Islands in the South Pacific. In 1839, the first missionaries to these islands had been clubbed to death, cooked, and eaten within a few minutes of landing. About ten years later, some other missionaries had landed on another of the islands where the natives showed an interest in their teachings, and the Lord gave them about 3,500 converts in a short period of time. They needed help in the work.

So in 1857, just 18 years after the first martyrs had shed their blood on the beach of the New Hebrides, Paton strongly sensed God’s call on his life to offer himself for missionary service there. He immediately met with strong opposition from many that knew him. They argued that he was leaving a certain ministry that God had obviously blessed for an uncertain future where he might throw his life away among the cannibals. His converts needed him and besides, there were plenty of heathen at home to reach. Why go half way around the world to reach these savages? He was even offered a free house and was told to name his salary, on condition that he would stay at home! But these temptations only served to confirm his calling to go to the South Seas.

Among the many who sought to deter him was one old Christian gentleman, whose crowning argument was always, “The Cannibals! You will be eaten by Cannibals!” Finally, Paton replied, “Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms. I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer” (John G. Paton Autobiography [Banner of Truth], p. 56).

Paton lost his wife and infant son within a few months of their arrival. He lived in almost daily danger of his life. But God spared him and he lived to age 83, spending his final years

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traveling around the world publicizing and raising support for the mission. Late in life he said, “Oh that I had my life to begin again! I would consecrate it anew to Jesus in seeking the conversion of the remaining Cannibals on the New Hebrides” (p. 496).

John Paton accomplished the work, the ministry of God because he lived his life in the manner that God calls each of us to live: *If we would resolve to do the work of God, we must put the ministry that God has given us even above life itself.* I trust you are convinced that you must and can do the same thing.

Discussion Questions

1. Is ministry the calling of every Christian or only of some? Give biblical support for your answer.
2. How do you know whether to hang in with a difficult ministry or if it is God’s way of moving you to a different ministry?
3. Why should every Christian flee from “the American dream”? Is it wrong to look forward to a comfortable retirement?
4. Does verse 26 imply that somehow Christians can be responsible for another person’s going to hell? What does it mean?
5. What are some steps you can take to ensure that you are not a lukewarm Christian?

Soli Deo Gloria

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