

Text: Acts 20.22-24

Proposition: A life committed to God's service pursues his course with determination despite uncertainty and fears.

We are working on Paul's farewell message to the elders of Ephesus. He is on his "farewell tour," returning to Jerusalem from Corinth (last destination) by way of Ephesus, or at least, Miletus, thirty miles from Ephesus.

Paul called the elders of Ephesus together (the pastors in the area), to give final instructions.

The first part of the message includes a little reminiscence, and last week we saw an impressive explanation of how someone becomes born again, through repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

The next section of the message turns to Paul's immediate plans.

As we think about what he says, we find in his words a model for Christian discipleship.

Read Ac 20.18-24, text 22-24

When we think about Christians who dedicate themselves to God's service, we often think of well-known pastors and missionaries — people like the apostles, like the "big name" missionaries of the last century, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, Hudson Taylor, or the great evangelists, John Wesley, George Whitfield, D. L. Moody and so on.

It is true that men like these gave themselves to gospel work in unusual and impressive ways.

Nevertheless, their work, and the work of many others, could not have come about without the dedication of hundreds and thousands of others, "ordinary" Christians who devoted themselves to serving God.

One thing men like the apostles and these well-known Christians I've mentioned can do for us, however, is to give us an example.

Our text today is one where Paul, just talking about his immediate plans, gives us just such an example to follow.

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I. Under Compulsion (22)

A. Personal commitment

1. The first phrase in the statement is under debate among commentators and translators
 - a. Is it “spirit”
 - b. Or is it “Spirit”
 - c. The word “spirit” has both connotations in the NT
2. Strong statements from the commentaries

“The reference to the Holy Spirit in verse 23 suggests that the same Spirit is intended in verse 22, not a reference to a mere inner conviction of Paul’s human spirit.”¹

“Probably Paul meant that he had committed himself to visiting Jerusalem since he was sure this was what God wanted him to do even though he realized that trouble lay ahead (cf. v. 3; 9:16; 19:21).”²

“Probably this refers to the Holy Spirit’s guidance in the apostle’s life.”³

“‘Bound in my spirit’ he means, as in 19:21, from a high sense of duty. The mention of ‘the Holy Spirit’ specifically in verse 23 seems to be in contrast to his own spirit here.”⁴

3. The translations also differ, some small “s” “spirit;” some big “S” “Spirit”
 - a. If he means the control of the Holy Spirit, it implies that he is unable to help himself – almost “possessed” by the Spirit

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 628.

² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ac 20.22.

³ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 413.

⁴ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ac 20.22.

- b. If he means the inner compulsion in his own spirit, he means that he is set on a course, he feels committed, it's a matter of personal spiritual integrity

I'm going to answer this question at the end of the message.

B. Clear destination

1. He is on his way to Jerusalem
2. He made this decision some time ago — in Ephesus itself

Ac 19.21 ¶ Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."

- a. At the end of his stay in Ephesus
 - b. Before heading off on the travels that took him to Corinth
 - c. Almost a year to a year and a half earlier
3. We've talked about his purpose: to deliver the offering he raised from the missionary churches for the Jerusalem church

Paul made up his mind to see this task through.

C. Unknown reception

1. This doesn't express a fear of bad reception from the Jerusalem church
2. Rather, he is uncertain what will happen to him there – an ominous statement expanded on in the next verse

The point to stress from this first verse is that Christian service, at a minimum, calls for a willingness to follow into the unknown.

- Of course, none of us know the future, but I mean more than mere uncertainty.
- I mean a commitment to a life that will likely face unknown hardships.

Mt 20.22-23 But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to Him, “We are able.”²³ He said to them, “My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.”

II. Fearful Expectation (23)

A. The special indications from the Holy Spirit

1. The mention of the Holy Spirit in v. 23 is a strong reason to assume that the Holy Spirit is the referent in v. 22
2. During this journey, the Holy Spirit is communicating a clear message to Paul
 - a. We don't have specific references to this earlier in Acts
 - b. But we have mentions in the next chapter

Ac 21.4 After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.

Ac 21.11 And coming to us, he [Agabus] took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, “This is what the Holy Spirit says: ‘In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’”

- c. These are the voices of prophets, presumably already speaking out from Corinth to Macedonia to Ephesus

B. The content of the message: “bonds and afflictions await”

1. We know that this led to a lengthy imprisonment, taking Paul all the way from Jerusalem to Rome
2. At this point, no specifics are known
3. Just the clear indication from the Spirit

C. The Bible indicates that disciples will suffer in God's service

1. God said this of Paul's future ministry

Ac 9.16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

2. Paul commented the same to the Philippians

Phil 1.29 For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,

3. Peter says Christians should not be surprised by this

1 Pt 4.12 ¶ Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you;

4. And Paul has this word for Timothy

2 Tim 3.12 Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Not only does discipleship mean pressing forward to an unknown future, but one thing about that future is certain: sufferings will come, somehow, some way, with surety.

III. Faithful Determination (24)

A. The determination about life

1. Paul isn't careless about life (not YOLO – taking foolish risks)
2. Paul puts the right value on his life: not "dear to myself"
3. He uses an idiom: "but not one word I make the soul of me worth"

Lexicon: "I do not consider my life worth a single word."⁵

Commentary: "a gen. of price, lit. 'not worth a word.'"⁶

⁵ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

⁶ Kellum, *Acts*, 236.

“The language reflects business accounting or reckoning, where his soul has its only worth in its service to God.”⁷

B. The determination about the finish

1. Paul had a mission from Jesus: his ambition was to see it through
2. The word “finish” = “perfect, complete”
3. The word “course” = the set course an object follows, like heavenly bodies, or like a racer running a track

The apostle wants to get to the end of the track, not leaving anything undone.

He will testify his satisfaction in this to Timothy:

² Tim 4.7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;

C. The determination about the course of life until the finish

1. On his track, he is determined to preach the gospel
 - a. “solemnly proclaim” – same word used in v. 21
 - b. The activity on the course is proclaiming the gospel no matter the uncertainties and fears
2. This brings be back to “spirit” vs. “Spirit”
 - a. I am going to side with “spirit”
 - b. The Holy Spirit doesn’t compel (not directly)
 - c. The disciple gives over his spirit to the Holy Spirit’s leading
 - d. The disciple makes a decision to follow, to live, to serve
 - 1) Not knowing exactly where or how
 - 2) Anticipating suffering
 - 3) Having one thing in mind: proclaiming the gospel

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 628.

Conclusion:

Proposition: A life committed to God's service pursues his course with determination despite uncertainty and fears.

The Lord calls all his people to this task. We all have a role to play, a job to do.

We carry a precious gospel with us, let it be our one ambition.

We live in perilous political times right now: let our minds be on the gospel and not our politics.

Some of us might walk through serious physical troubles: let our minds be on the gospel and not our weakness.