

CALL OF DUTY

ACTS 20:16-21:1 NOVEMBER 11, 2020

Most of us can probably think of a movie where a character is about to escape some situation but, with almost no time to spare, they decide they have to go and settle one last score. If it's the hero, it gives them one more chance to do something heroic before getting away just in time. In those scenes the characters make that choice because they feel like they *must* do it. They've got to sort out something that's been left unfinished. It's a matter of honor and duty and passion.

We see something a little like that in our text this evening. Paul is hurrying out of the Gentile world, trying to get to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost, but before the ship pulls out into the Mediterranean he decides he's got to take care of something. And what follows is a very tender meeting between him and some of his friends from the city of Ephesus.

As they talk it's clear that Paul felt it was his *duty* to give them this farewell. He testifies that he had faithfully carried out his duty toward them and then he charges *them* with duties of their own. Though this is a meeting of pastors there is still a lot for all of us to learn in this tearful goodbye.

We begin in chapter 20, verse 16.

Acts 20:16 - ¹⁶Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, because he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, for the day of Pentecost.

It's unusual for Paul to *avoid* something. We sometimes see him willing to go talk to violent mobs. Sometimes he was willing to be illegally beaten. So why was he hoping to bypass the province of Asia? Well, he wanted to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. Scholars calculate that he'd have about 30 days to get there, which is not a lot of time when it comes to first century travel across the empire.

Throughout this section we see Paul making decisions. He *decided* to go back through Macedonia. He *decided* to walk, rather than sail, to Assos. He's *deciding* to sail past Ephesus. Your life is full of decisions. Some of them are more trivial, some are monumental. But we can't always tell which is which, right? So what should we do? On the one hand, we don't want to live in such a way that we become paralyzed. I'm going to go out on a limb and say you don't need to pray for an hour before deciding what socks to wear tomorrow. But, at the same time, we don't want to swing the other side and live a life that neglects to include God in our decision-making. God has an opinion on where you live and where you go to college and where you work and how you fill your days. More than an opinion, our Lord has *intentions* and *commands* for us to follow. How do we do that? The believers in Acts did it by being Spirit-filled. We're watching them do it, page after page.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:

1 Corinthians 7:17 (ESV) - ¹⁷Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

Jesus told us that the Holy Spirit is our Helper who will teach us all things and guide us in the truth. We have the Scriptures as a guide for how to live a Godly life. With these precious gifts, we can make decisions that keep us in line with God's will *and* put us in position to be used for His glory. That's how Paul was making these choices.

Acts 20:17 - ¹⁷ Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and summoned the elders of the church.

Their ship must have had a layover, so Paul squeezed out this one last mission before they left port. It was about 30 miles from city to city. I've never had to walk to the Fresno Airport, that's about how far it would be. But, after receiving this sudden summons, these elders come straightaway.

Now, why was only Ephesus represented? What about the other cities in Asia that had churches? Well, it seems God placed an urgent message on Paul's heart for *this* group, a prophecy in fact.

Acts 20:18-19 - ¹⁸ When they came to him, he said to them, "You know, from the first day I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility, with tears, and during the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews.

Paul is convinced that he's never going to see these people again, though he would *write* to them the letter we have in our Bibles after this encounter. But even though he could write, there was a pressing need in his heart to have this talk with them.

God will sometimes set time-sensitive duties and opportunities before us. We think of the owners of the upper room in which Jesus had His last supper with the disciples. God had led them to make that room ready, and it was in a specific window of time. As soon as Paul finishes with these guys, they walk him onto the boat. We can almost see the crew loading cargo and drawing up the gangways as they huddle together, but this was a needful meeting.

As he begins, we see Paul being very personal and genuine. It's hard to get a clear picture on what Paul was like when you interacted with him personally, but we get a glimpse here. He reminds them that he was emotionally affectionate and it was *genuine*. More importantly, he invites them to think back and consider how his life *matched* the Gospel he preached. His life was defined by humility and service to the Lord. And I think that's an important note in his choice of words: What Paul did was not *for* the human community. It wasn't for the cause of justice. It was service he was rendering to the Lord as his Master. Now, our God *is* a God of community and justice, but Christians sometimes get their own ideas about how to bring those things about and then slap the name of Jesus on it, when it wasn't His idea at all.

Our duty in this life is to serve *the Lord*. As Master, He *will* send us to minister to others, but let everything we do be unto Him.

There are a lot of tears in these verses. It shows us that Paul wasn't simply a traveling speaker or performer. He had a real connection to these people. God wants us to connect with Christians this way. We can't build a personal relationship with *every* Christian we meet, but we are to be knit together with *some* local fellowship of believers.

Let's pause to consider how amazing it is to see that all the hate Paul had for Christians earlier in his life has been replaced by God's love. It's incredible what God can do in a heart. Not *that* long ago, Paul had been a man who wanted every Christian destroyed. Now, he risked his *own* life to make more Christians and to *serve* them.

But this sort of brotherly love is not just a Paul thing. We each have a duty to cultivate and live out this sort of love for God's people.

1 Corinthians 16:14 - ¹⁴Do everything in love.

Colossians 3:14 - ¹⁴Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

1 Peter 4:8 - ⁸Above all, maintain constant love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins.

Proverbs 10:12 - ¹²Hatred stirs up conflicts, but love covers all offenses.

Part of the way the Gospel transforms us is washing the hate out of our hearts and replacing it with love. There are things that make us angry. People we would like gone. But the love of Christ *compels* us into the kind of caring compassion that took Jesus to the cross to die for His enemies.

Acts 20:20 - ²⁰You know that I did not avoid proclaiming to you anything that was profitable or from teaching you publicly and from house to house.

We see here that Paul wasn't doing what he did in order to be popular or receive the favor of man. He was no politician. Yet, even though he was above all that, he was deeply devoted to people and he was devoted to fortifying them through the teaching of the Word of God.

When the Bible is taught, the goal should be that people are convicted of sin and are shown how to be strong in the Lord. Whether that's for salvation or sanctification (the day-by-day process of becoming more like Jesus), God's Word is not meant to bully. It does make *demands* on us and it *reveals* that we are sinners, but it does that so we can then realize why and how Jesus came to save us from our sin. When Paul taught, people weren't depleted, they were enriched by the truth.

Acts 20:21 - ²¹I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.

Faith without repentance is not genuine. In the movies they will use movie money. There are two kinds, depending on how close the shot is going to be and how realistic it needs to look. One of them is *very* close to real money on the front, but on the back it's blank.¹ The one side can seem as real as can be, but it's of no value without the back also. The same is true with repentance and faith.

Ray Stedman has a good thought about repentance and how it is a duty we carry out not just *once* when we become born again, but continually as we walk with God:

*"To repent means to stop thinking and acting and living the way you have been. Instead, step out in faith. Trust the living Lord who is in you to operate through you, and venture out, move out! The Christian life is intended to be exciting, compelling, always interesting, always different, always lived on the verge of adventure and danger. That is why it must be characterized by **faith**. So, you see, there are the two basic steps, and you must take them over and over again. The way you begin the Christian life is to repent and believe. And that also constitutes your walk through the Christian life."²*

Certain jobs have ongoing fitness requirements or qualifications that must be kept up. I think the marines have 2 a year. As believers, we have a duty to continue in repentance and faith.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvAskG242y8>

² <https://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/acts/last-words>

Acts 20:22-23 - ²²“And now I am on my way to Jerusalem, compelled by the Spirit, not knowing what I will encounter there, ²³except that in every town the Holy Spirit warns me that chains and afflictions are waiting for me.

It was humbling to see what Paul wrote here and then wonder when I last heard from the Holy Spirit. Have we interacted with Him lately? We never want our relationship with Him to be like one of those old friends that, if asked about, you say, “Oh I haven’t heard from that Guy in forever!”

Paul knew he was headed for trouble. The Spirit wasn’t warning him in order to *stop* him from going, but to *prepare* him for what was ahead. As believers, we have a duty to face the unknown and to accept the fact that *sometimes* suffering is part of the package. Subscription boxes are all the rage right now. Blue Apron, KiwiCo, Bespoke Post. You don’t always know what’s going to come in the box, right? It’s been *curated* just for you. In the spiritual life, it’s not all that different. “What’s in the box today? Ok...some encouragement and some new wisdom. I see we’ve got some suffering in there too!”

But, as one commentator wrote: “*We should not shrink from danger or from death. Duty is to be done at all hazards. It is ours to follow the directions of God; results we may safely and confidently leave with him.*”³

Paul was at peace because he knew that, since he was walking with God, it didn’t really matter what he met on the road ahead. His Savior and Friend could be trusted to keep him in His loving care.

Acts 20:24 - ²⁴But I consider my life of no value to myself; my purpose is to finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God’s grace.

Paul really wanted to *finish* his race. He wanted to finish it well, and he didn’t necessarily want it to be over early, but he was looking forward to the *end*. By this point he had already had his vision of heaven we read about in 2nd Corinthians, so we can sympathize. But, as he headed to that finish line, he wanted to play out every last second.

That doesn’t mean we can never stop doing something that we do right now for the Lord. Paul was about to enter a very different season of ministry, one where he *didn’t* travel the world establishing churches. But even when life changed, his purpose and desire to serve God did not. In that sense, no matter whether the terrain was a level sprint or a slow, rocky climb, he kept going.

Acts 20:25-27 - ²⁵“And now I know that none of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will ever see me again. ²⁶Therefore I declare to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, ²⁷because I did not avoid declaring to you the whole plan of God.

Paul reveals here that we have a *duty* to the people around us. To bring them the Gospel. Many of you have probably been in a safety training and heard the poem “I Chose To Look The Other Way” by Don Merrell. It opens:

*I could have saved a life that day,
But I chose to look the other way.*

*It wasn't that I didn't care,
I had the time, and I was there.*

I don't want us to be condemned, but reminded that we do have a commission and command to go and preach to those who are lost. As we do so, both individually and as a church, like Paul we want to keep in mind the "whole plan of God." God's plan for a person or a family or all mankind is more than just the 5 popular topics that stock Christian bookshelves. Marriage, parenting, finances, those sorts of self-helps that are constantly churned again and again. God has a comprehensive and involved plan, spanning from creation to consummation and it's all knit together. So, we want to be aware of it and learning more about it. We can be by systematically reading and studying the whole of the Bible. Paul believed that it was his duty to be well-versed in the plan of God and we do too.

Acts 20:28-31 - ²⁸Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. ²⁹I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them. ³¹Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I never stopped warning each one of you with tears.

So now, he is giving the watch over to these spiritual shipmates. It wasn't that he was tired of helping them, far from it. But the Lord was leading him on and so he had to lay the care of this church down for others to take up as *their* duty.

It would've been quite a loss, in one sense, to have Paul say, "This is it. I'm headed out. You're on your own." And then to be told that some very real threats were going to come against their church, specifically. But, Paul was telling them and had shown them how to equip themselves for the job ahead. What a great thing that God empowers us to continue the work of the church in an unbroken chain of growth from that time until now.

Part of their job was going to be resisting these wolves. Toward that end Paul told them to stay alert. Not *paranoid*, but *watchful*. There's a difference between the two. And watchfulness is *part* of being on duty. Paying attention and using our minds and keeping a look out.

Acts 20:32-35 - ³²"And now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified. ³³I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴You yourselves know that I worked with my own hands to support myself and those who are with me. ³⁵In every way I've shown you that it is necessary to help the weak by laboring like this and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, because he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

So, we're got a duty to love and to be alert and also, we see, to walk in grace. Grace is the way. It is able to build and repair and fortify. Though wolves would be doing their thing, we know there were also faithful men there. Men like Timothy.

We see in Paul's example that we have a duty to be content. Paul had laid hold of contentment, both in blessing and in severe want. We can too, because we have the same Spirit within us. In Hebrews 13 we're commanded: "Keep your life free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have."

Along with that we see Paul saw it as his duty to provide for others. We would flesh this out to mean those who cannot provide for themselves. We know Timothy had many infirmities. He may have had long periods where he was unable to work. Today, we have many wonderful ways to provide for those who have no provision. And it is our duty to allow the Spirit to lead us into *which* of those He would like us to involve ourselves in, if we're able.

Acts 20:36-21:1 - ³⁶ After he said this, he knelt down and prayed with all of them. ³⁷ There were many tears shed by everyone. They embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ grieving most of all over his statement that they would never see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship. ¹ After we tore ourselves away from them, we set sail straight for Cos, the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara.

It's a sad farewell, but as most of us know, this life has far too many sad farewells. But, though we may have to part ways with those Christians who are dearest to us in this life, we can know that we *will* be reunited with them again in heaven. Where there will be no more hurt, no more wolves, no more danger. Only joy forevermore, together with our Lord.

God has given us so much and part of it is duty. Duty to Him and then to others. Duty to love, to preach, to give, to watch, to face the unknown, to obey, to repent, to run the race. These aren't things we have to do in order to earn salvation or to make God happy with us. But they are part of the transformation the Lord accomplishes in us and the wonderful Kingdom work He has sent us out to be a part of. We have what we need to do all these things. Now we get to live them.