

The Weekly Word
March 25-31 2019

The year is flying by as March ends. We are one-quarter of the way through 2019. The Book of Acts is also moving steadily to its conclusion. Happy reading as you follow Paul in his ministry...

Grace and Peace, Bill

To hear the Bible read click this link... <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/>.

Monday, March 25: Acts 20- Finishing Well...

In my reading of Acts this time around, I find myself drawn to and challenged by Paul and how he lived for the Lord. Today continues this trend and verses 23-24 arrested my attention. *I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.*

In particular, verse 24 spoke to me. The heart of that verse could (and probably should) be the aim of every Christ follower. *I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me...*

I find myself thinking, pondering and ruminating on what it would look like if that were true of me. My life and calling is not the same as Paul’s which is why I am focused on the heart of verse 24, excluding the words that speak about Paul’s particular focus.

I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me...

A few questions that are driving my personal ponderings...

- Do I consider my life worth nothing compared to Jesus’ call?
- Is my ONLY aim to complete the task Jesus has given me? What about retirement, love for my kids and grand kids? Is this part of God’s task or a distraction from His task???
- Do I know what task the Lord has given to me? Do I know when I will have fulfilled it?

And so my pondering goes...

Where is God taking you when you consider Paul’s words as if they were your own: *I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.*

Lord, confirm in my heart the tasks you have for me to do and complete as my mission from You during my life as Your disciple. I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Tuesday, March 26: Acts 21- Listening to the voice of God...

I have had to make some significant decisions in my life. As a Christ follower I want my decision to be in line with God’s direction for my life. Making a decision by implication means there are options before me. Which way should I go? What path should I take? Sometime the decision at hand is binary; yes or no, sometimes it is A or B. The kind of decisions I am thinking of cannot be both/and.

Paul was given information that required a decision. I watch him to see if I can discern some life lessons for myself...

After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.' "

The presenting issue is that a prophetic word declares that imprisonment is waiting for Paul if he goes to Jerusalem.

When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done" (10-14).

His friend heard the prophetic word and attempted to prevail upon Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Their intention was good hearted, meant to save Paul from pain and possible death.

Paul's response is, *I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.* Simply put, if this is God's will I am willing to accept it.

God could have released this prophetic word to stop Paul from going to Jerusalem... like God did when He closed the door for Paul to go to Phrygia (Acts 16:6-10). Or the prophetic word could have been given by God to Paul so that he doesn't lose heart when he is arrested in Jerusalem because Paul would know the arrest is God's will.

Paul had to choose. *After this, we started on our way up to Jerusalem (15).* Paul chose to continue on to Jerusalem. He made his decision.

I wish we were privy to Paul's decision process, but this is what I see...

1. Paul made up his own mind; he was not swayed by the voices of others.
2. Previously Paul had felt compelled to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22). He did not allow the best intentions of others to get in his way from following through on what he believed were God's direction.
3. This was not the first time Paul was warned about hardships to come in Jerusalem (Acts 20:23). For Paul this prophetic word may have offered greater detail, but the general information had already been revealed to Paul through the Spirit.

Paul stayed the course because God had not lifted the conviction that he must go to Jerusalem.

What do I learn? Friends can help me discern, but what I hear or sense from the Lord, personally, is what I must follow.

Lord, I pray for the conviction of Paul as I make my various decisions. I pray that I will always listen for Your voice and then follow You. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Wednesday, March 27: Acts 22- God's bigger plan...

I had a number of different thoughts as I read this chapter.

First, I thought that the chapter breaks at the beginning and end of the chapter were odd. They break up one continuous narrative. Oh well, the chapter breaks are what they are and I know that chapters and verses were added later to help people find particular locations in the text.

Then I thought about how Paul so smoothly moves into telling his conversion story. It feels like he was prepared to tell his story –maybe he has given this basic testimony many times already. What occurred to me is that we would all be wise to prepare our basic testimony, so that as occasions arise we are prepared to tell our 'God-story'.

Next thought, I bet that the Roman commander could have released Paul once he learned Paul was a Roman citizen since Paul didn't do anything wrong. As I thought about this I also realized that God was working His plan, a plan that would take Paul to Rome. So even though Paul could likely have been released, he was not because God was working a bigger plan. This made me realize that sometimes our hardships –I think prison counts as a hardship –are part of God's plan. And God's plan maybe to work some things out in our lives through the hardships or as in Paul's case, God might be working on something completely different and our hardship is part of God's greater plan. Either way we must learn to submit to God and His will... whatever it might entail!

This last thought leads me to prayer...

Lord, I want to be open to Your will... always open to Your will whatever it may be. Oh Holy Spirit, please work in my life growing me in maturity so that I can more and more faithfully follow Your will. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Thursday, March 28: Acts 23- A good conscience...

Right out of the gate the first verse caught my eye. *Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day"* (1).

It hit me; I want to be able to say personally what Paul spoke... *I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.*

That is quite a statement. There is a sense of surety, not boastfulness; a deep-in-his-bones feeling that he has run the race God set out for him well. That in my book is something to aspire to...

So I found myself thinking how I should live in order to have that kind of a sense in my bones as I reach the end of my life:

- Stay connected daily with the Lord. What does this mean practically? For me, think about God, talk to God, listen for God's leading and direction and keep short accounts with God.
- Serve and work for God's will in the world... give myself to God's church and God's work in the world. Use my gifts and talents, offer my resources and time.
- Be available and useful for God. Learn to obey Him when He speaks and directs and opens doors.
- Grow in love, for God and people... the above two are a basic approach to loving God, so what about loving people? Develop the Fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace... Treat all people with kindness, civility and equity. Get past myself and look at life with other people in mind.
 - Be honorable in life
 - Be generous in life
 - Share my love for God –Father, Jesus and Holy Spirit –with others.
 - Be the kind of person people want to be around.

These are some basics. I am sure there are more.

Lord, guide me, I pray, into closer connection and intimacy with You. Through my Lord Jesus, I pray. Amen.

Friday, March 29: Acts 24- What to do in times of waiting...

When two years had passed... (27a).

I tried to imagine how Paul coped being in prison for more than two years waiting for someone to decide his fate. Paul was in prison for a ‘crime’ he knows he didn’t commit and basically he is just waiting.

God has told him he will testify in Rome. I wonder if by this point Paul has forgotten the word about testifying in Rome.

I am not a good wait-er. I can’t imagine Paul, the man of action that he is, is a very good wait-er either. But in prison –probably more like house arrest –he waits.

I’m wondering what Paul does to keep himself on track... on focus... engaged in the work of God.

Since the text is silent, I need to engage my imagination. I suspect Paul witnessed and talked with his captors and Felix about Jesus whenever he had opportunity. And I suspect he made his own opportunities. As I reread Paul defense, I noticed that by his 5th sentence (at least in Luke’s reporting of Paul’s words) he referenced the Way and Jesus. Paul had an amazing ability to turn conversations and speeches around to Jesus. I imagine he did the same with Felix and his guards and captors.

I suspect Paul studied his scrolls. We don’t know what scrolls and parchments he might have had in prison. We know in the pastoral letters he asked for Timothy to bring some to him (2Timothy 4:13). That is probably later than this occasion, but I suspect that he might have had access to other scrolls, either his own or borrowed from friends. So I imagine Paul studied.

I suspect Paul prayed and listened and talked with the Lord. Only God knows what He told Paul during those times of conversation.

I suspect Paul wrote letters. Somewhere around this time Paul wrote Romans. Whether he wrote during this prison time we cannot be certain, but the idea of writing during a long time of imprisonment is certainly possible. Also, Paul may have written other letters that did not survive. So writing is certainly a possibly while he waited.

Paul had no idea how long his waiting would last. He was at the mercy of the Roman officials. Somehow he filled his time.

I am not particularly good at using ‘waiting’ time effectively and in Gospel service. Paul causes me to think how I might be able to reframe waiting time to be more God focused...

Hmmm... this is worth chewing on.

Lord, open my eyes to Your possibilities for service during my active time and now as I watch Paul particularly in my time of waiting... No time is lost time when it is in Your hand’s, Lord. Help me to realized this and to cooperate with You when waiting is Your will. I pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Saturday, March 30: Acts 25- Plan but be open for God’s redirection...

Paul’s saga continues. This chapter spans about 3 weeks time.

After two years of waiting, Felix vacates his post and Festus takes over and inherits the problem of Paul. To his credit, Festus attends to Paul’s case with diligence. Still no decision is made.

Festus, recognizing it is a religious problem, suggests that a court case be convened in Jerusalem. Paul not wanting to be placed in the hands of the Jews, appeals to Caesar which is his Roman right.

When King Agrippa arrives in town to welcome Festus, the new governor, Festus attempts one more time to reach a decision on Paul with the advice of King Agrippa. The chapter concludes just as Paul is about to give his defense to Agrippa.

More waiting and more testifying... such is Paul's life at this time. Hurry up and wait is Paul's life... a new governor, more waiting. Even when his case is handled with diligence the wheels of justice turn slowly.

Again today I tried to put myself in Paul's sandals. What was life and faith like for this man who was always on the move? I really don't know, but it raises all kinds of anxieties in me about what I would do in prison having to wait for someone else to determine my fate.

I hope I could be like Paul, who appears to have what I call 'determined faith.' Paul held his faith in God tightly in one hand, testifying to Jesus whenever we hear him speak. Paul understood Roman law and was willing to invoke it when necessary. Under Roman law Paul believed he was innocent.

I also believe that Paul held tightly to the notion that he would testify in Rome. Luke made a point of including God's revelation to Paul in Acts 23:11, *The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."* The context of this word is immediately after Paul testifies in court to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, suggesting that Paul would testify to leaders in Rome. However, the court aspect of the context is not demanded. In his letter to Rome, Paul believes his time in Rome will be a stop on the way to Spain.

Putting all this together, it seems Paul is making plans for his next Gospel adventure. Still Paul is able to hold 'his plans' loosely, knowing God may have other plans for Paul to fulfill.

This last thought offers me an 'ah ha' moment on life. Plan for where one believes God is leading you, but be open for the Lord to redirect you as He wishes. After all, you may have misunderstood God's leading and be slightly off the mark. As humans we always need to be open to the Lord's midcourse corrections!

So, Jesus... I open my heart to Your leading. Guide me in this season of life and sow into my life the seeds for my next season of life, so that I remain ever faithful to You. As needed, Lord, correct and redirect me as Your will determines. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sunday, March 31, 2019, Sunday Worship

If any of my thoughts or the Bible readings spark questions send an email reply and I will do my best to answer all questions from people on the list... I will answer personal questions privately; general questions will be answered in a subsequent email installment.

If you are reading along with me from the Living Hope website you can send questions or request being placed on the weekly email list by emailing Lisa at office@LivingHopeCT.org.

Click here for a link to my sermons on the web. Sermons are generally posted within 2 days.