

Acts

Acts 20:13-38 - True Christian leadership

To Paul it was extremely important to keep everyone encouraged, and take whatever time was needed to teach, teach, teach. He didn't just scoot through an area, start up a church and rush off to start churches elsewhere. In Troas, for instance, he stayed up all night teaching them (verse 11), and despite a sleepless night he was off next day walking "(back) through that area speaking many words of encouragement" to the churches he'd started, **Acts 20:2** - even retracing his steps back to Greece as well (a month's walk one way) where he "stayed three months" (verse 3). He also took several men with him on that journey (verse 4), so he could teach and train them personally, just like Jesus did with his disciples. And in each of these churches he was also gathering relief funds for those in Jerusalem suffering through a famine.

So we're learning a lot about Paul, and the remarkable person the Holy Spirit had transformed him into - from a violent, blaspheming hater of Christians to a deeply concerned encourager and teacher of Christians. On his arrival in Miletus in western Turkey, for instance, his immediate priority was to send messengers on a two day trip "to Ephesus for the elders of the church" to meet with him (verse 17), because it was so important to Paul to warn, encourage and reassure them all face to face, knowing what the future would hold for them.

We also see here that Paul had a schedule, that "he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost," **verse 16**. Again, it's another insight into Paul, because Pentecost had become a great day of celebration for his fellow Jews who'd responded to the Holy Spirit back in Acts 2:41-47, and he desperately wanted to be in Jerusalem to celebrate it with them.

But rather than hurry off he also wanted to **spend time** with the pastors of the churches in and around Ephesus. There were likely many little churches and therefore many elders pastoring them, which explains why Paul wanted them to come to him rather than him having to go round to each of them. Ephesus may have had thousands of Christians, especially after Paul's two years of teaching had turned the city upside down and "the word of the Lord had spread widely and grown in power" (Acts 19:20). But there was no one place big enough for them all to meet together, so they'd been meeting in homes instead (like the home of Aquila and Priscilla, 1 Corinthians 16:19).

It's to this sizeable meeting of little home group pastors, then, that Paul pours out what is probably the most insightful and intimate look into his heart. And it may be the first time that Paul spoke so openly too, so thanks to Luke we can imagine ourselves sitting in that group listening to Paul as well.

Paul starts off in **verse 18**, "**You know how I lived** the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia." And isn't that where the impact of our Christianity begins too - it's in how we live. And how encouraging is that? I think of my kids and grandkids, and anybody else who knows me, that **they really do notice how differently I live**. They may not comment, but if they ever question or wonder what's so different about Christianity, we can answer with Paul's confidence, "Well, you know how I live, right?" And if anyone ever asks us, "What is the best way we reach people or lead people to Christ?" Paul gave us the answer: it's in how we're living the Christian message that explains it best and appeals the most.

And Paul hit the ground running on that one as soon as he arrived in a country or city. From 'day one' Paul's life mirrored what he was teaching. And it was always the same, **verse 19**: "I served the Lord with great humility - and with tears too - when being severely tested by the plots of my Jewish opponents." God came first, and nothing could shake him off that, even if at times he was in tears because the stress was so great, and especially when it was his own countrymen attacking him and lying about his motives. They were like family to him, so it must have hurt him terribly (Romans 10:1).

But being accused of all sorts of things he never said or meant had given Paul the confidence in **verse 20** to say, "(You also know) I didn't shrink from passing on anything that would be helpful to you, both in public and in your homes." Despite everything that had happened to him he hadn't backed off one bit. And his priority had remained the same. In large groups or small, Jews and Greeks, opposition and no opposition; it was always, always (not only living what he was teaching) but also taking whatever time it took - like a two year daily discussion in Acts 19:9-10, or an all nighter in Acts 20:7,11 - to fill people in on **the two great truths of the Christian message**, which were "turning to God in repentance and having faith in Jesus," **verse 21**.

And those **two truths** really needed explaining too, to help a person realize, "**Have I ever been going about life the wrong way**, compared to what God had in mind for us humans. I want to change. I want to stop living and even thinking like I used to, and start living as God intended me to live. I'm done with life the way the world teaches it, I want to live what God teaches in his word, because that, according to Jesus, is what sets me free."

And by “free,” it means the kind of transformation Paul went through, where he was no longer being eaten up with horrible attitudes toward others, or dismissing people as inferior. And no more using others to his benefit either, or seeing people as competition to be put down a notch. And no more being consumed with trying to impress people, or win favour with his superiors. All that stuff takes a heavy toll in mental and emotional strain, and especially when you know you’re being a hypocrite and a self-centred fraud, which Paul seemed to have known about himself, because when confronted by Jesus, he asked “Who are you, Lord?” Oh, he knew who it was, and knew he had it coming to him for his behaviour. No wonder Paul said the only thing that really counts “is (becoming) a **new creation**” (Galatians 6:15) - having all that junk stripped from his life, and living a totally new life instead.

There’s a problem with becoming a new creation, however: it’s discovering it doesn’t happen overnight. That’s why Paul added “**faith in Jesus**” to repentance. Just as it’s hard accepting we’ve been going about life the wrong way, it’s hard going about life the right way too. To live a transformed life like Paul’s - with the strength to see us through the impossible, the ability to esteem others as greater than ourselves, and being emptied of all desire to impress and wanting to serve instead, along with all the other things Paul talks about in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 - can knock the wind right out of us.

But that’s why “faith in Christ” is the other great truth of Christianity. It kicks in at the point we realize **we need help**. Repentance is the realization we’ve been going about life the wrong way; faith is the realization we need help to live the right way, as God describes it. And Paul knew exactly where that help came from; it came from a living Jesus Christ who gave us the Holy Spirit to live his life in us (2 Corinthians 3:18 and 12:9).

Repentance and faith, then, are what the Spirit is doing for us every day. It’s how we know we’re “living by the Spirit and keeping in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25), because it becomes our daily walk. Any time we recognize, “Oops, that’s not right” it kicks the desire to do what’s right instead. And how many times does that happen in a week, or even a day? Probably tons of times, but that’s our daily walk as Christians; it’s a constant repetition of repentance and faith aimed at growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus so we become more and more like him (2 Peter 3:18). Every situation and circumstance we come up against, then, becomes another opportunity to experience **living our new life by the power of a living God**.

It was this same power that now “compelled” Paul, **Acts 20:22**, to “go to Jerusalem,” even though it probably meant more “prison and hardships” (23).

Which sounds terribly negative, so who would want to become a Christian? But if it makes you into a genuinely unselfish person, isn't that what our world needs more than anything right now? "Who can I trust?" Is the desperate cry of so many people whose trust has been shattered by lies and propaganda. To discover a person like Paul, therefore, who says, "I consider my life worth nothing to me," because **to him what counted** was people learning about and living this new creation made possible by Jesus, and with no ulterior motive other than being of service, then wouldn't people **want to know you?**

They certainly wanted to know Paul, because it was a terrible wrench to hear him say they wouldn't see him again (verses 25 and 38). They openly cried and hugged him at his departure (37), because they'd all witnessed something remarkable and beautiful in Paul and his leadership.

He was so, so genuine, that he could openly say, "I am innocent of the blood of all men, FOR I have not hesitated to proclaim to you **the whole will of God,**" **verses 26-27**. Paul had never endangered the life of anyone by diluting the truth, leaving people vulnerable to "savage wolves" (verse 29) "distorting the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (verse 30). He'd preached the truth and nothing but the truth - no matter if it meant being beaten, stoned, or chained to soldiers in a prison cell - to get one thing done every day he woke up above the soil and not six feet under it. And that was to "finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace," **verse 24**, so that those in his care were **fully equipped to ward off deception**. The worst thing to Paul was an innocent Christian being bamboozled or intimidated into "turning to a different gospel," **Galatians 1:6** (+ 2 Corinthians chapters 4 and 11).

That's why, for "three years" he'd "never stopped warning each of you (elders) night and day with tears," **Acts 20:31**, to "guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers and shepherds of the church of God, bought with his own blood," **verse 28**. "With tears" tells us the kind of leader Paul was. It literally made him cry when people he'd spent hours, weeks, months and years teaching - so they knew about the new creation God was making them into, and how to live it - when "men even from their own number" managed to weasel in their own ideas instead (verse 30).

But having done his utmost - even paying his own way, and the expenses of his companions (33-34) - it was time for Paul to leave. By example he'd lived Jesus' words, "It's more blessed to give than receive," and by "hard work helped the weak" (35). Now it was their turn to be "committed to God and his word of grace" (32) to keep themselves and their flock solidly anchored. Because that, to God, is what defines **true Christian leadership**.