

What we read in the Book of Acts took place 25 years after the Cross and the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Paul was on his 3rd and final missionary journey. He anticipated that his end was near, and so he was encouraging the people all along his way to carry on faithfully despite his future absence. This morning we're going to talk about what this means for us in our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

READ Acts 20:17-35

Now from Miletus (Paul) sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the Kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all

things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

We read, **Acts 20:17**, **"Now from Miletus (Paul) sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him."**

Paul sailed to Ephesus, a coastal city. He was the founder of the church there. But there had been a riot when he preached there a year earlier. Perhaps you remember the story: The silversmiths of the idols of the goddess Artemis realized their trade was going to dry up if they didn't stop this evangelist from making everyone into Christians!

So instead of going into the city, Paul had the pastors of the church come to him in the harbor, which was in Miletus. Upon their arrival, he told them, **Acts 20:22-27**, **"Behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there,²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me."**

Paul said he was **"constrained by the Spirit."** In other places the Greek word for **"constrained"** is translated, "bound" or "tied up." So it's a play on words when Paul says he's **"constrained by the Spirit"** but he also anticipates **"imprisonment"** at the hands of men.

We can hardly bear the idea of being told by anyone, even God Himself, what to do, let alone being **"constrained," "bound,"** or **"tied up"**!

But Paul also wrote, **Galatians 5:13**, **"you were called to FREEDOM, brothers. Only do not use your FREEDOM as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love SERVE one another."**

We were once slaves to sin and the devil. But now because of Jesus, we are free, and with that freedom we've bound ourselves to God that we would **"through love serve one another."**

Have you ever thought about it that way, that because of our relationship to God we are slaves to one another, serving one another with love? Elsewhere Paul

commands us to **“outdo one another with good works” (Romans 12:10)**. That’s what he was talking about. In other words, our lives are shaped by acts of love.

In the news there’s been a lot of talk about women being enslaved by powerful men through sexual harassment. This has been our reality since the beginning of time, but it is evil. It’s the opposite of the life of selfless service that Paul and Christ preached.

Paul said, **Acts 20:24, “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself.”** Paul was dead to the things of the world, and in his mind and heart he was raised to a new life through what he called, **“the Gospel of the grace of God.”**

This teaching gives me peace, for it helps me to see that everything in this life rests on God’s grace, God’s promises. With my eyes on him my fears, anxieties, and frustrations fall away like the chrysalis of a caterpillar, revealing wings, wings to fly high above the distress and darkness of this world in which I live. This is possible because our lives are filled to overflowing with God’s grace.

Today, the news is filled with the world’s angst, and the devil would like you to believe there’s no hope, and you may as well give up. But thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ we have been born anew into his love and perfect peace which he’s pours down upon us so generously.

Paul said, **Acts 20:26-27, “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you,²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD.”**

Because Paul knew he would not return to the church in Ephesus again, he was freeing himself from any further responsibility to it. That’s what he meant when he said, **“I am innocent of the blood of all of you.”** He said he had declared **“the whole counsel of God.”** In other words, it was now up to the pastors to do their job.

“The whole counsel of God” according to Paul was faith in Jesus Christ and repentance from sin. That’s it: A simple message centered on Jesus. I had a friend in seminary who built rockets for NASA before he decided to become a pastor. He liked to say, “This is not rocket science. I know. I used to be a rocket scientist!”

Paul said, **Acts 20:28-31**, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore **BE ALERT**, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.”

With these words, Paul illustrated for the pastors the full extent of their ministry. First, he told them to stay on target with their teaching with the whole counsel of God, and then he warned them to watch out for the wolves, those killers of the Christian faith who “**will come in among you**” and who are already “**among your own selves**,” who are “**men speaking twisted things**.”

This warning was as important during Paul’s time as it is in ours. For there many false teachers inside the Christian church. But we need not worry. For distinguishing between wolves and Christ’s sheep is easy to discern. All we need to do is ask questions like, “Is the message I’m hearing about growing in my relationship with Jesus or is it about something else?” And, “Do the lives of the people who worship in this place reflect the humility and selfless love of Christ or not?”

As a case in point, if you met someone who was just passing through town and they asked you where they should go to church when they got home, what would you tell them? Since they asked the question, we can assume they’re not Lutheran. What would tell them?

What I do is I encourage the person to look around, go to different churches, meet the people, listen, and watch, and then go back to that church where they heard the story about the sacrificial love of Jesus. Go back to that place where the people imitated Christ. Go back to that church which lifted up your heart and made you feel whole.

Indeed, this is our ministry to our community, reflecting the grace the Lord poured down on us to everyone we meet, being like little Christ’s to our neighbors.

Paul said, **Acts 20:33-35**, “I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ **You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me.** ³⁵ **In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'**”

Paul's lifestyle reflected what he believed. He never rested on his laurels as the famous evangelist who'd planted dozens of churches in Asia Minor and Greece, though he could've. But he worked hard. For he knew sin was always at his door, especially the sin of covetousness. So he worked to provide not only for his own needs but for the needs of others too! To encourage his heart in his work, Paul remembered Christ's promise: **“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”** So too, like Paul, our lives are energized by the promises of God.

Friends in Christ, may the message of Jesus, the Word of His grace, be our word, for that is the same Word that forgave us for our sins, blessed us unto eternity, and made us heirs to the Kingdom of God.

This week may we be encouraged that our lives are filled with God's GRACE to overflowing. We have everything we need to follow him.

This week may our lives be shaped by acts of LOVE. Just as our Lord Jesus transformed our hearts with his love and sacrifice, so too we can make a difference in the world.

This week may our lives be energized by the PROMISES of God. He is the way, the truth, and the life; he is love; he is the light of the world; and he walks with us wherever we go.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.