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## FINISHING THE COURSE

Acts 20:22-27

By

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Acts Lesson 52

## Finishing the Course Acts 20:22-27

It's easy to begin something new. Maybe it's a new diet or exercise program, a new job, or a new relationship with someone special. There is always a sense of excitement about a new beginning. But life isn't a 50-yard dash; it's a marathon. The trick is not just to begin well, but to finish well. I have known many who have gotten excited about serving the Lord in some way. They started with gusto. But then they got hit with criticism. They found that people didn't respond to their ministry as positively as they had hoped. They got into conflicts with their fellow workers. Perhaps the stress spilled over into their marriages. So after a few years, they left the ministry with a lot of bitterness and cynicism.

None of us want that to happen to us. Paul did not want that to happen to the elders in Ephesus. He wanted them, just as we want for ourselves, to sprint across the finish line, not to drop out of the race. He is sharing from his own life the secrets of a ministry that runs strong until the end of life. In his final letter to Timothy, he declared, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

The secret to Paul's strong finish is summed up in verse 24. I have a difficult task today: I want to convince you that verse 24 not only applied to the apostle Paul, but that it applies to each of you that knows Christ as Savior and Lord. Paul did not consider his own life of any account as dear to himself, in order that he might finish his course, the ministry that he received from the Lord Jesus. Paul is saying that to finish the race, he put his ministry above even life itself. In the same way,

To finish the course, you must put the ministry that you received from the Lord above even life itself.

You may be thinking, "That's fine for the apostle Paul or for those who have been called to the ministry or mission field. But, hey, I'm just a layman." Let's begin with a basic biblical truth:

1. To finish the course, you must recognize that God has entrusted a ministry to you.

There is no such thing in the Bible as a Christian without a ministry! We have fallen into a wrong way of thinking, where some who are super-committed go into "the ministry," but everyone else just putters around at serving the Lord in their spare time as volunteers. It is significant that *every* time in Scripture that the subject of spiritual gifts is mentioned, it uses the word "each" or "every" (Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:7, 16; 1 Pet. 4:10). As Peter puts it, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." Every Christian has received a gift from God. Every Christian will give an account to God of his stewardship in using that gift for God's purposes, as Jesus taught in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30).

Thus whether you're a waiter, an accountant, a carpenter, or a housewife, if you're a Christian you must see yourself as being in the ministry, just as I'm in the ministry. I happen to get supported by my ministry and you may not. In that matter, you are more like the apostle Paul than I am! He chose to work in a "secular" job to pay his bills. Ministry is not just a task or sphere of service; it is a mentality or way of thinking that permeates all of life. Seeing yourself in the ministry means that you are available to God 24-7, to use you to help others draw near to God. It may mean serving someone in a practical way by meeting a need. It may mean sharing the gospel with an unbeliever or encouraging a believer by listening to his problems or by sharing relevant Scriptures. You can minister through giving or through prayer.

But whatever form it takes, ministry means not focusing on yourself, but on others by being available to God to work through your life. You won't fulfill the ministry that God has given you if you aren't even aware that you are in the ministry! But, you are! Maybe you're thinking, "I'd like to do that some day, but right now I'm just too busy to serve God." Consider this second point:

2. To finish the course, you must recognize that you are a conscript, not a volunteer.

Paul tells them that he is "bound in spirit," on his way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to him there, except that the

Holy Spirit solemnly testified to him in every city that bonds and afflictions awaited him (20:22-23). But this did not deter Paul or make him decide that it was time to move to that nice retirement community on the Aegean Sea, where he could play golf every day.

Why not? Why didn't Paul think, "Bonds and afflictions don't sound like a happy future. I think I'll opt for an easier course." Because Paul didn't see himself as a volunteer for Jesus. He saw himself as a conscript under orders from his commander.

It's difficult to determine whether the phrase "bound in spirit" should be spirit with a small "s" or with a capital "S." Some translations take it one way, and some the other. Some take it that Paul had an inner compulsion to go to Jerusalem, but it was not from the Holy Spirit. It was Paul's own idea. Donald Grey Barnhouse goes so far as to say that Paul was sinning by going there (*Acts: An Expositional Commentary* [Zondervan], pp. 185-187)!

But since Luke does not give us any hint that Paul was sinning or making a serious blunder here (or in 19:21), and since Paul was a man who walked in close fellowship with Christ, I conclude that it was the Holy Spirit impelling Paul to go to Jerusalem, while at the same time warning him of the hardships that he would encounter there. In other words, Paul saw himself as a conscript who had been drafted into the Lord's army. He was under orders. So he sought to obey what he believed the Holy Spirit was commanding him to do.

All too often, the church conveys the wrong message, that we are looking for volunteers to serve Jesus. The problem with that view is, if you can choose to serve, then you can also choose not to serve or to quit serving if the service isn't to your liking. But conscripts don't have a choice. If you get drafted, you serve in the army because you were chosen to serve. You may not like the food, you may not like your living quarters, and you may not like where the army assigns you to go. But you serve anyway because you are under orders.

That's how Christians ought to see themselves. If Christ bought you with His blood, you belong to Him as His slave. Slaves don't choose to serve. They're under orders. If the service isn't

pleasant or fun, they're not free to quit. To finish the course, we need to see ourselves as conscripts, not volunteers.

3. To finish the course, you must sign over your life to Jesus Christ, expecting hardship as you follow Him.

Paul did not consider his own life of any account as dear to himself. If following Christ meant hardship, slander, imprisonment, or death, he had settled the issue long ago. He was willing to die for the Savior who had died for him. When James Calvert went out as a missionary to the cannibals of the Fiji Islands, the captain of the ship sought to turn him back. "You will lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go among such savages," he cried. Calvert replied, "We died before we came here." Those faithful missionaries had signed over their lives to Jesus.

Again, there is the mistaken idea in evangelical circles that there are two options for the Christian life. The most popular option is to sign up to go to church when it's convenient, drop a few bucks in the offering plate now and then, and live for the American dream of accumulating enough money and stuff to live a comfortable life. If you have time, you may decide to volunteer at church, but only if it's convenient. Your priority in life, under this option, is to enjoy yourself, live a good life, and someday to retire and spend the last 15 years of your life driving around America in your motor home, or playing golf in sunny Arizona.

The second option is not so popular. It's only for gung-ho types, who probably signed up for the Green Berets during Vietnam. In this option, you're admittedly something of a fanatic. You give up the American dream and any right to your own will in order to serve Jesus. You live a pared-down lifestyle and give away lots of money to the Lord's work. Or, you may even give up the comforts of America and go live in difficult conditions to reach people for Jesus. As a missionary, nobody expects you to live at the same comfort level as the folks back home do. If you did, your commitment to the cause would be suspect! But the folks back home aren't called to the same level of commitment as you are! You're called to deny yourself because you're on the missionary track of commitment. They have not been called to that.

But look at Mark 8:34-35. Jesus was speaking not only to His disciples, but also to the crowd: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." In the context, Jesus wasn't calling people to some super-committed discipleship track. When He called people to radical self-denial, to the point of death (as "taking up your cross" implies), He was calling them to salvation! Every follower of Jesus, not just a few super-committed, is called to this total, all-out, lay-down-your-life kind of commitment! Jesus is pretty graphic about what He will do with those who profess to know Him, but are lukewarm in their commitment: He will vomit them out of His mouth (Rev. 3:16). So if on a scale of 1-10 you'd rate your commitment to Jesus as 5 or 6, you'd better turn up the heat! You need to be totally surrendered to Jesus and His will, even if it means hardship to the point of martyrdom.

The Bible makes it clear that following Jesus will mean hardship at some level. Not everyone will be tortured or martyred, but Paul plainly states, "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). As he encouraged the new believers in Galatia, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). He urged the Thessalonians not to be disturbed by their afflictions, because "we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know" (1 Thess. 3:3-4).

You may be thinking, "Why would I want to sign over my life to Jesus if it means that I can expect hardship and affliction?" The answer is, because the only other option is to live for yourself and worldly pleasure here and now, and face God's judgment and wrath in hell for eternity! Remember, if you try to save your life by living for yourself, you'll lose it. But if you sign your life over to Jesus and the gospel, you'll save it. Those are the words of Jesus Christ, not of Steve Cole!

Once you entrust your life totally to Christ, you don't need to live in fear of the future, because your future is in His hands. Thankfully, God doesn't let us know the details about what will happen to us in the future. I've often thought that I wouldn't want

to know what King Hezekiah knew, that he had 15 more years to live. Think of the anxiety as you faced the final countdown! The Holy Spirit told Paul that bonds and afflictions awaited him, but nothing more. We should live each day all-out for the Lord, knowing that if He brings trials into our lives, He will also give us the grace to endure them. But we must live in light of eternity, not for the fleeting pleasures of this life only. The only way to live in light of eternity is to be totally abandoned to Jesus Christ here and now, trusting in Him in every trial.

Thus, to finish the course, you must recognize that God has entrusted a ministry to you and that you are a conscript, not a volunteer. You must sign over your life to Jesus Christ, expecting hardship as you follow Him.

4. To finish the course, you must keep the finish line in view: faithfulness to the gospel of God's grace.

To finish the course, Paul said that he needed "to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (20:24). Not everyone is called to be a preacher or missionary, as Paul was. But with whatever gifts God has entrusted to us, the bottom line is the same: we must be faithful by our lives and words to the gospel of the grace of God. If our lives and words betray the gospel of God's grace, we are in some sense guilty of the blood of those who were tainted by our failure (20:26). If our lives and our words bear witness to the gospel of God's grace, we are innocent of the blood of those who came in contact with our witness.

Paul here is referring to God's words to Ezekiel, that He had appointed him as a watchman over Israel. If the watchman sees the enemy coming and doesn't sound the warning, he is liable for the city's destruction. But if he sounds the warning and the people ignore him, he has delivered himself; their blood is on their own heads (Ezek. 3:17-21; 33:1-9).

I confess that I do not totally understand what the Lord means when he tells Ezekiel that He will require the blood of wicked men from Ezekiel's hand if he doesn't warn them of impending judgment. It must mean a loss of rewards in heaven, because Ezekiel was clearly a saved man who could not be eternally condemned. But whatever it means, it's a scary warning! More than

once God has used that warning to give me the courage to confront someone who was in sin. I feel a need to deliver myself before God, whether the person I confront likes me or not.

If you want to be innocent of the blood of all men, keep your eye on the finish line. There you are, standing before the Judge of the whole earth. To hear “well done,” your life and, as God gives opportunity, your words, must bear witness to the gospel of God’s grace. His gospel of grace is the good news that He will pardon guilty sinners who trust in Christ. But it also includes the bad news that He will eternally damn all who trust in themselves or their own good works, thereby spurning what Christ did on the cross. If people are not convicted about their sin before a holy God, they will not flee to Christ for refuge from God’s wrath.

Paul uses the phrase “preaching the kingdom” (20:25) as parallel with “the gospel of the grace of God” (20:24). The kingdom is the realm where Jesus is Lord and King. Our lives and words must bear witness to the lordship of Jesus if we want to hear “well done” when we cross the finish line. So keep your eye on that goal, to bear witness of the gospel of God’s grace and of the lordship of Jesus Christ.

5. To finish the course, you must feed on and proclaim the whole purpose of God.

Paul told these men, “For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (20:27). That phrase implies that Paul was balanced in teaching the full breadth of God’s Word. Heresy is often truth out of balance. Paul didn’t ride theological hobbyhorses. He refers to God’s purpose in Ephesians 1:11, where he says that we have been “predestined according to His purpose, who works all things after the counsel of His will.” We do not proclaim the whole counsel of God if we tiptoe around the doctrine of God’s sovereign predestination (see also, Acts 2:23; 4:28; 2 Tim. 1:9). On the other hand, we do not proclaim the whole purpose of God if we fail to teach what Scripture so plainly teaches, that every person is responsible for his sins and that everyone is commanded to repent and to trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (Acts 16:31; 17:30). Both doctrines are true.

As Paul explains in Ephesians 3:1-12, the purpose of God includes the mystery, that the Gentiles are now fellow members of the body of Christ through the gospel. That was a hard teaching for the Jews to swallow, but Paul taught it. Teaching the whole purpose of God means that we don't dodge the hard truths of God's Word. If His Word reproves sin, we reprove sin. If it corrects wrong thinking, we correct wrong thinking.

You may not be gifted to preach and teach God's Word, but you are responsible to grow to understand the whole purpose of God and through whatever gifts He has given you, to impart your understanding to others.

### Conclusion

John G. Paton was born in Scotland in 1824. He was reared in a godly home and came to personal faith in Christ. As a young man, he worked in an inner city mission in Scotland. But the Lord put it upon his heart to go as a missionary to the fierce cannibals of the New Hebrides Islands in the South Pacific. In 1839, the first missionaries to these islands had been clubbed to death, cooked, and eaten within a few minutes of landing. About ten years later, some other missionaries had landed on another of the islands where the natives showed an interest in their teachings, and the Lord gave them about 3,500 converts in a short period of time. They needed help in the work.

So in 1857, just 18 years after the first martyrs had shed their blood on the beach of the New Hebrides, Paton strongly sensed God's call on his life to offer himself for missionary service there. He immediately met with strong opposition from many that knew him. They argued that he was leaving a certain ministry that God had obviously blessed for an uncertain future where he might throw his life away among the cannibals. His converts needed him and besides, there were plenty of heathen at home to reach. Why go half way around the world to reach these savages? He was even offered a free house and was told to name his salary, on condition that he would stay at home! But these temptations only served to confirm his calling to go to the South Seas.

Among the many who sought to deter him was one old Christian gentleman, whose crowning argument was always, "The

Cannibals! You will be eaten by Cannibals!” Finally, Paton replied, “Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms. I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer” (*John G. Paton Autobiography* [Banner of Truth], p. 56).

Paton lost his wife and infant son within a few months of their arrival. He lived in almost daily danger of his life. But God spared him and he lived to age 83, spending his final years traveling around the world publicizing and raising support for the mission. Late in life he said, “Oh that I had my life to begin again! I would consecrate it anew to Jesus in seeking the conversion of the remaining Cannibals on the New Hebrides” (p. 496).

John Paton finished his course because he put the ministry that he received from the Lord Jesus above even life itself. I hope that I have convinced you that you need to do the same thing.

### Discussion Questions

1. Is ministry the calling of every Christian or only of some? Give biblical support for your answer.
2. How do you know whether to hang in with a difficult ministry or if it is God’s way of moving you to a different ministry?
3. Why should every Christian flee from “the American dream”? Is it wrong to look forward to a comfortable retirement?
4. Does verse 26 imply that somehow Christians can be responsible for another person’s going to hell? What does it mean?
5. How can we discern whether we are balanced in our understanding of God’s whole purpose?

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