

FREEDOM IN BONDS

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AC 20:17 From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ¹⁸ When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ¹⁹ I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. ²⁰ You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

AC 20:22 "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴ However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

AC 20:25 "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

AC 21:7 We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day. ⁸ Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

AC 21:10 After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ 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 Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.' "

AC 21:12 When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ 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." ¹⁴ When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

The context of our message today is Acts 20 and 21. But the text is Acts 20:23,24. The first thing I want to look at is the **A LIFE**. It is in the text: "nor do I count my life dear to myself."

The Apostle Paul stirred up more controversy than most of the characters in the Bible. From the very beginning of his conversion until he was beheaded in Rome under Nero in 67 A.D. at the age of 67 years, Paul went from controversy to controversy. He was a "lightning rod" in the Mediterranean world where he preached to Jews and Gentiles that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord of all humanity.

I don't think it was so much the message of Paul that instigated the anger and the controversy and the persecution and the intrigue and the resentment that the great apostle faced daily. Rather, I believe it was Paul's absolute commitment to the Gospel that made him such a target. Like Jesus who set his face like a flint toward Jerusalem, Paul also set his face like a flint toward Rome, the center of the world of that day. He would not be content until he had preached God's word to the city of Rome, the 'Babylon' of the world of Paul's day. Not just Rome, however, for he had committed himself to preach the Gospel also anywhere that the Gospel had not been preached, making him a pioneer missionary unparalleled. Dr. Luke must have enjoyed writing about Paul whose life was so exciting.

We find Paul ending his 3rd missionary journey, on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to bondage, and without his knowledge, on his way to Rome and to martyrdom. He will soon become God's Ambassador in Bonds.

But Paul himself tells us that he has freedom in his bonds. AC 26:29 Paul replied, "Short time or long--I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

Eph. 6:20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

PHP 1:7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.

PHP 1:12 Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

Col 4: ³ And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.

COL 4:18 I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

2TI 1:16 May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains.

Phil. 1: ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.
¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.

As we see from these references, Paul does not count his life dear to himself. He had found something more than himself in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Gospel. I remember reading, years ago, that the secret of happiness is to find a cause greater than ourselves to which we can give ourselves wholly and unreservedly. Paul spent his first professional years trying to make a name for himself. Then he was found by and found Jesus, and in Jesus he found a cause much greater than himself. Paul now were not *dear for himself*, but certainly *dear for other*. Someone wrote about the German pastor and martyr, Dieterich Bonhoeffer, calling him A Man for Ohters. That was no certainly true of Paul. He was totally committed to telling others the Gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ. As we can also see from his admonition to the Elders of Ephesus, he was concerned for the Christians who had believed the Gospel. Paul now had no real concern for himself, but a great concern and a great burden and, oftentimes, a great heartache for the Church, the Body of Christ. It is almost as if Paul's conversion had caused him to step outside himself, and to step into Christ, thereby stepping into others and stepping into God. Paul had lost his self-care in his care for others and his care for the Gospel of Christ.

The Ephesian Elders saw this in Paul, and although they tried to persuade him to do otherwise, they finally relented and said in 21:12 'the will of the Lord be done.' Paul life was not dear to himself, but it was dear to others, and it was certainly dear to God.

When we reach that point, caring more for other's salvation and caring more for God's will to be done in this world, we too will find happiness and freedom in our bonds.

In our text we also find that there is **A RACE!** Paul first calls this 'my race.' Isn't it interesting that the Bible tells us in Hebrews that we all have A Race! HEB 12:1 "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

Paul had a particular race set before him. He saw his life as a marathon event in which he had no choice but to accept. Life for Paul was not a 40 yard dash, or an 80 yard dash, but a race that continued as long as life was in his body. Paul called it My Race.

You too, once you became a follower of Jesus, once you entered the Christian arena of life, once you decided that Christ was the meaning of life, --you too entered A Race.

It seems strange to say that you have freedom in bonds when you enter a race, a mixing of metaphors! But, despite what life throws our way, whatever the adversary puts in our path, whatever chains or bonds are used to fasten us, we must still run that race. Notice it is My Race, not your race, not our race, but My Race.

Moreover, since it is a marathon race, Paul mentions that he must Finish his race. One of the great tragedies of my life is to know Christians who started the Christian life well, but who, because of some problem, suddenly dropped out, and by their actions are going in the wrong direction. To such, I remind them of General Sheridan whose troops were fleeing the battle, stood in his stirrups and cried out, "Men, you're going in the wrong direction!" Then he charged toward the enemy and his soldiers followed him and won the battle.

When we have problems in the Christian life, when we feel like quitting, when we feel like taking a long furlough, when problems are so disturbing that we wonder if it's really worth the effort, we must rise up and say to ourselves, "I started this race by the grace of God, and by the Grace of God I will finish it."

Then Paul says, in effect, "The joy of finishing that race will be my JOY!" Why does he say that? Because real JOY comes from winning. In the athletic contests someone wins and someone loses. The winner is happy! The loser is sad! But the Christian race is not against human competitors; rather the Christian race is against the great enemy, satan, who is also the enemy of God the Father and of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can only defeat him through the Strength of the Holy Spirit! But what joy that will be!

I must, however, remind you that the Joy of the Ultimate Win should detract from the Present Joy we have as Winners. On one of the morning shows I was watching as the participants described what it took to be Happy. They failed to mention the Beatitudes of Jesus who taught us how to be truly Happy. Those of us who follow Jesus are already Winners. I thought about what these people were saying and it occurred to me that *a winner is the happy person and a loser is the sad person*. I decided that on the basis of living. Whenever I win a contest, or complete a task, I am happy. I have joy. When I lose a contest, or my team loses a contest, I am sad. When I recognize that I am a winner who will one day be an ultimate winner, then I am happy in the present. I must not allow anything negative, as a Christian, to keep me from the JOY of Being a winner, now! When I accept this secret I will be free despite my bonds.

We have in our text A LIFE, A RACE—and finally, A GOSPEL OF GRACE. That Gospel of grace is the Goodnews of Jesus Christ. Paul recognized that when He met Jesus. His Gospel became the preaching of the Gospel: ¹CO 15:1 Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

¹CO 15:3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born

Paul Received this Gospel whenever he met Jesus on the Damascus Road, and when he went into Arabia. This Gospel gave him freedom in his bonds. This same Gospel must be received by us if we are to know the Truth that Sets Us Free.

The Gospel Paul received was the Gospel of a Person, the Good News that Jesus is the Christ. The Death, the Burial and the Resurrection and Appearance of Christ, was for Paul and all the early Christian preachers the Good News for all who would look unto Christ and believe the Gospel. Christ's resurrection and His appearance was proof that He was Israel's Messiah and the World's Savior and Lord. In a word, then, the Gospel of

Grace is the Gospel of the Person of Jesus Christ. It is the Gospel of Grace for all who will believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. It is the Gospel of a Person whose name is Jesus!

Further, this Gospel of Grace is about the Kingdom of God. Listen to verse 25 of chapter AC 20:25 "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again." Paul preached a Person, but in preaching the Grace of God he preached the Kingdom of God. He was saying, in effect, "Jesus is the King of the Jews, but He is also the King of the Universe." He was preaching what John preached. He was preaching what Stephen preached. He was preaching what Jesus Himself preached. Jesus is Lord! Jesus is King! Jesus will reign in Jerusalem on David's Eternal Throne.

For those of us who observe the deterioration and the possible downfall of Western Civilization, it is indeed a comfort to know that we serve the King Eternal, Immortal, Invisible, the only wise God, who reigneth forever and forever! Amen! Hallelujah! To quote the modern poet, "We sing in our chains like the sea!"