



To Finish the Race

Acts 20:16-38

Christian's Journey ... Like a Race

On Paul's "third missionary journey" he spent over two years in Ephesus (19:1-41). Then he went through Macedonia to Greece, where he stayed three months (20:1-3). Then he traveled back through Macedonia and Troas, where he began sailing toward Caesarea and Jerusalem (20:3-15). On the way, his ship stopped at Miletus, about 48 km south of Ephesus (20:15).

1. Read Acts 20:16-24. In this passage, Paul talks about "finishing the race" (20:24).¹ In what ways is the Christian's life-journey like a race?² In what ways is it *not* like a race?

Manner of the Race

After the elders of the Ephesian church arrived in Miletus, Paul reminded them of the manner of his life and service in Ephesus (20:17-21).

2. What did Paul say about "how he lived" when he was with them?³



Paul fearlessly preached whatever was helpful to them, in both public and private settings⁴ (20:20). He faithfully "declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" (20:21, NIV).

Motivation in the Race

Read Acts 20:22-24. Now Paul must go to Jerusalem. Why? Because the Holy Spirit compelled him to go. The Spirit had also warned Paul that prison and hardships were facing him (as they already had!). Still Paul did not know what would happen to him in Jerusalem (20:22-23).

3. This is another example of God's guidance. What can we learn about God's guidance from these verses?⁵
4. After mentioning the uncertainty, prison, and hardships, Paul said, "However..." (20:24) What was most important to Paul?

¹ 'race' (*dromos*, from *edramon* – 'to run') – metaphorically, a 'course' of life. Most translations use 'course' but the NIV uses 'race.' Paul uses the race metaphor elsewhere (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Philippians 2:16; 2 Timothy 4:7).

² First of all, how is the Christian journey *unlike* a race? Christians are not in competition with one another. And their success is not entirely dependent on their own strength and effort. How is it *like* a race? It has a starting point (conversion), a finish line and prize (glory), and a direction (moving forward). The course is set by authority (God). It requires discipline, training, focus, endurance, and perseverance. It is important to note that the Christian 'race' is run 'in Christ,' who has already won the victory. By the power of the Spirit, we too will be victorious – in Christ.

³ His manner was characterized by consistency ('the whole time'), great humility, deep concern for others ('tears'), endurance and perseverance through opposition, and faithfulness to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ (20:18-21).

⁴ For two years, Paul preached regularly in 'the hall of Tyrannus,' a lecture hall where many heard him (19:9-10).

⁵ We do not know exactly *how* the Spirit compelled and warned Paul. Anyway, Paul was both certain and uncertain. He was certain that God was guiding him to Jerusalem, but uncertain about what would happen. What little he knew was not very comforting! He would face trouble. As Christians, we should be willing to respond to God's guidance without having to know all of the details. Also, we should be willing to face trouble if that is where God leads us.

- **Reflection:** In your life-journey, what is most important to you? As a Christian, what is most important? Is it comfort and “security” *your way*? Or is it God’s will for your life?

Team in the Race - Passing the Baton

Read Acts 20:25-31. Paul believed he had completed his task in Ephesus. He had fulfilled his responsibility.⁶ Now the elders must “take the baton.”

The elders were “overseers,” responsible for spiritual oversight of the church; and “shepherds,” responsible for care of the flock. This was a serious responsibility because “the flock” is actually God’s flock, bought at a great price – the blood of Christ (20:28).



5. What was Paul’s primary concern? (20:29-30) What dangers would they face?
6. What similar dangers may we face? How can we “be on our guard”?⁷

The Christian’s journey is not an individual’s race. It involves godly, Spirit-led leadership; sound teaching; equipping others for ministry; mutual encouragement; etc. It is a team effort.

Example in the Race

Read Acts 20:32-35. Paul was an example of selfless giving,⁸ and he encouraged others to do the same. “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (20:35).

Paul committed the church leaders to God, and to “the word of his grace” (20:32). This word is “the good news of God’s grace” (20:24) which is preserved in the Bible. As we commit ourselves to God’s word, God’s grace will build us up and give us “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for [us who have believed]” (1 Peter 1:4).

The Race Goes On

Read Acts 20:36-38. Paul did not think the Christians in Ephesus would ever see him again (20:25). The goodbyes were hard. But they knew the race would continue, for God’s glory.

Reflection/Application

- What race are *you* running? Where does it lead? The Bible says the only race that leads to eternal life and glory is the Christian race. Do you need to enter that race? Those who enter that race “must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:21).
- As a Christian, what is the manner and primary motivation of your life? Read Philippians 2:12-18; 3:4-10; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12; 6:3-10; and Colossians 1:24-29. You may not be a “Paul,” but his example should challenge the values and priorities of each Christian’s race.

⁶ The phrase ‘innocent of the blood of any of you’ (20:26) alludes to the language of Ezekiel 3:16-21; 33:1-9. ‘As a watchman who warns people faithfully of the coming of an enemy is not guilty if they choose to ignore the warning, so it was with Paul as a preacher of the gospel.’ (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* [Grand Rapids: IVP, 1980], p. 332)

⁷ Paul was concerned about distortion of the truth, from both outside and inside the church. The content of the faith is vitally important. To avoid being led astray, Christians must correctly handle the word of truth (the Bible). Pastors and elders today still have the great responsibility of helping protect the flock from distorted, misleading teaching.

⁸ Paul did not want to be a burden to the churches he served, so he worked outside the church, particularly as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3; 1 Thes. 2:9). Getting paid for vocational ministry is appropriate (1 Cor. 9:14; Luke 10:4-7), but Paul did not claim that right (1 Cor. 9:15). Ministers today may work as paid staff, ‘tentmakers,’ or both.