

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:
Pastor Stephen Felker
Swift Creek Baptist Church, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
8/22/04

Acts 20:22-27 “Do You Have a Mission in Life?”

Intro. I read of a small harbor town on the ocean shore where many ships have crashed on the rocks in violent weather. This town became well-known because of a dedicated rescue team which aided mariners in distress. The rescue team would rally to the sound of the siren and rush to the scene of the accident, risking life and limb to save the sailors from drowning. As time went on, the citizens of that tiny town raised enough money to build a rescue station close to the shore. While this greatly facilitated the operation, it softened the dedicated team as well. As time went by, they added some of the comforts and conveniences that other rescue stations had. Through the years, the rescue station became a social club where the town's people gathered to have fun and relax. Ships would still crash upon the rocks, the alarm would still sound, but eventually no one responded. They were reluctant to leave their comforts because their commitment to rescue the miserable mariners was no match for their complacency.¹

Do you see the lesson in that story for the church today? Complacency, unconcern, and apathy is a problem today. When you try to get people concerned about the Lord and matters of eternal significance, you can get frustrated at their lack of concern. I'm afraid that most churches are focusing too much on earthly comforts and pleasures.

But often, the same people who are apathetic about spiritual matters are very concerned about other things. There are those who are more concerned about who wins a baseball game than they are about their eternal soul. Some are very concerned about food, clothing, and the things of this life. But Jesus said that we should seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto us. So I believe that many people are too apathetic about spiritual and eternal matters, and too concerned about earthly matters. Some are even apathetic about everything!

In this passage of Scripture, Paul gives us a good example of the things that should truly concern us. Simply put:

I. WE SHOULD HAVE A MISSION IN LIFE

Let's place this text in context. Paul had called together the elders of the church in Ephesus, where he had served as a missionary pastor for 3 years. He was on his way to Jerusalem, and wanted to meet with them, and give one final charge to them. He knew the danger lay ahead, but he was determined to go to Jerusalem because he had a sense of mission, a sense of purpose. He had a calling in life. He had his eyes on fulfilling his mission. That mission is stated in v.24, "...that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus...." Here Paul once again uses an athletic analogy that was familiar to so many in his audience. In Paul's writings, life is often represented as a "race" (*dromos*) to be run, like the races of the Greek athletic games. His mission in life was to run that race well, and to finish the race.

Sadly, too many people have no sense of purpose or meaning in life. They just wander through life, without a purpose, goal, or meaning. They have no idea where they came from, or

¹ Pulpit Helps Illustration Collection II [Illus.#C-805].

where they are going. At best, their purpose in life is some earthly accomplishment, such as a good career, or a good family. At worse, their only purpose in life is merely self-gratification.

General Douglas McArthur addressed Congress after returning from Korea, and after thirty years of service to our country in a leadership roll. In his memorable speech, he included these sad lines: "I am closing my fifty-two years of military service. When I joined the Army, ...it was a fulfillment of all my boyish hopes and dreams. The world has turned over many times since I took the oath on the plane at West Point, and the hopes and dreams have long since vanished." Is your only purpose in life your career? Remember, your job will not last forever. After your career is over, what then? What will you have to live for?

But Paul was different. He knew that God had a purpose for his life, with eternal significance. Psychologists tell us that a sense of purpose, a sense of significance is essential for psychological health. So this is a very important issue I am talking about today.

Young people, do you know what you are going to do with your life? Have you discovered your purpose in life? Have you set any goals to achieve that purpose? Do you believe that God has a plan for your life?

Not only should we have a sense of mission and purpose in life, but secondly:

II. WE SHOULD DEFINE OUR MISSION IN LIFE

In the last part of v.24, Paul defines what his calling in life was. It was to fulfill "the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus...." This actually states what the race course was for Paul. The word translated "ministry" (*diakonia*) refers to a service performed for the benefit of others. Jesus taught is that our purpose in life is not to live for self, but to live for God and for others. He said in Mt. 20:28, "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Rick Warren said, "Everybody needs a ministry in the church and a mission in the world." God has called you to serve Him, and to serve others.

Now let's get more specific.

A. Our Mission Is to Win People to Christ – This was clearly Paul's mission. As he said in v.24, his mission was "to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." Gospel is good news. We have good news to share. God is gracious. He is forgiving. We are saved by grace. No works are required. Jesus paid the full price for your salvation when He died on the cross. God is willing to forgive you freely of all of your sin. He is willing to give you the gift of eternal life (Rom. 6:23).

I believe this is reflected in Paul's desire to go to Jerusalem. In v.22 he said, "And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem...." He felt compelled to go there. Why is it that Paul was concerned about going to Jerusalem? Why would he be willing to face hardship, and even death, to go there? One key reason why he wanted to go was to win the Jews to Christ. He had an intense love for his Jewish brethren. Turn over to Romans 9:1-3. Not long before this trip to Jerusalem, he wrote, "I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh." It seems that Paul was saying that he would be willing to suffer in hell if his Jewish brethren would be saved. Then in 10:1 he wrote, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved." Here we see the heartbeat of the apostle Paul. That is why he was willing to go to Jerusalem, even though suffering, and possibly death awaited him.

One way Paul was hoping to win his Jewish brethren to the Lord was to take an offering to

them. Look over also to Romans 15:25-27 (read). Paul was hoping this offering from the Gentiles would touch the hearts of many Jews. The offering would be an evidence of what the gospel of the grace of God (v.24) can do in the lives of Gentiles. Perhaps some would be saved as a result.

There are other ways to win others to Christ. In v.25 Paul talks about preaching the kingdom of God. Some people like me are called to preach. The word “preaching” means “to declare a message as the herald of the king.” The herald tells what *the king* tells him to declare. He is a man commissioned and sent with a message, and he must not change that message in any way, but faithfully proclaim it. In v.24 he uses the word “testify” (*diamarturomai*), which means, “to solemnly give witness.” It reminds us of the seriousness of the message and of the ministry. Paul could personally testify to the power of the gospel in his own life. His life was dramatically changed. Do you have a testimony of what God's grace has accomplished in your life? You may not be called to preach, but you should be able to testify!

Have you accepted the fact that your mission in life is to have some part in winning others to Christ? Well let's find out. Do you ever invite others to church? Do you ever tell others of what Christ has done for you? Have you ever shared the gospel with someone? Do you ever come to church visitation? Eight out of ten Southern Baptists say they are willing to share their faith, yet only one in four report being intentional about sharing his or her faith.² Are you willing to reach children for Christ through S.S., AWANA, or VBS? Are you supporting the ministry of this church with your time, talents, and tithes? Are you willing to give to our mission offerings so that many people all around the world can hear the gospel and be saved?

On a cold winter day in 1972, Wayne Nix had been riding a horse since daylight checking cows. Coming back to the barn about 10 a.m., the foreman met him with a message: "Your boy has been in an accident." The foreman put the horse up for the concerned father while his boss got into his truck and left. A crowd was gathered on the road where it happened. His boy, Mike, and one of his friends were riding a motorcycle and hit a deep ditch. His son was killed and the other boy was broken up badly. No words could describe how that father felt. His only son was dead.

But because a Sunday School teacher and others told his boy about Jesus, his son was saved and now his son is waiting for him in heaven. Up to that point, they had been just an average Christian family. Then, Wayne Nix became a pastor with a great ministry. Do you now see why evangelism is so important? Your next invitation to someone may lead to his or her salvation.

B. Our Mission Is to Make Disciples to Follow Jesus – This is stated in the Great Commission of Jesus in Mt. 28:19. It is also implied in v.27 of our text, “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.” Paul did not just preach about salvation. He also taught them the rest of the truth and purposes of God. That is why I practice expository preaching. I preach through book after book of the Bible, that I may “declare to you the whole counsel of God.” Furthermore, Paul said in v.32, “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up....” Sunday School teachers are helping to fulfill this mission. Parents have a role in teaching their children to become disciples of Jesus.

C. Our Mission Is to Minister to the Needs of People – This is addressed in our text regarding the benevolent offering that Paul was delivering. Many of you are not called to preach, or to teach, but you are called to minister to the needs of people. Are you involved in ministry?

By the way, this fall we will learn more about our purpose in life during our 40 Days of Purpose campaign. Don't miss it!

² Research Services, North American Mission Board, SBC [Illus.#C-616].

Not only should we define our mission in life, but also:

III. WE SHOULD NOT BE DISTRACTED FROM OUR MISSION IN LIFE

A runner in a race must keep his eyes on the goal of finishing the race well. He cannot look back, or be distracted by looking around. Even so, our focus must be on fulfilling our purpose in God's eternal plan. We must not be distracted by earthly, temporal concerns. In vv. 22-23 we see that Paul was aware of possible dangers in his mission to go to Jerusalem. But notice what Paul said in v.24a, "...nor do I count my life dear to myself...." Paul's temporal, earthly life was not precious (*timios*) to him. It was not something of great value, something to hold on to at all cost. For example, his earthly comfort did not concern him. In v. 23 we see that he knew that bonds and tribulations (*thlipsis*) awaited him in Jerusalem. Imprisonment was very bad in those days. Prisons were smelly, cold, and uncomfortable. Yet, he was determined to go to Jerusalem anyway. He had a mission to accomplish, and that was more important than his personal safety and comfort.

Furthermore, his physical life did not concern him. Though he knew that hardship was in his future, according to v.22 he did not know if martyrdom was in his immediate future. He considered death a possibility. But even if death awaited him in Jerusalem, that was not a major concern. Self-preservation was not a goal highly esteemed by Paul. He understood that when one becomes a Christian, the cross implies that we even accept the possibility of dying for Christ. Paul knew the words of Jesus in Luke 9:23-24, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it." Paul had died to sin and to self. He refused to be distracted from his mission in life by such concerns.

Why did Paul have this attitude? Why was he not concerned for his personal comfort and safety? It was because he considered everything in light of eternity. He said in 2 Cor. 4:17-18, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal." That is why Paul was such a great Christian. He was far more concerned about the eternal things of life rather than the temporal affairs of life.

We ought to be challenged by the example of the apostle Paul. Sometimes we do not serve God as we ought to because we are too concerned about earthly and temporal matters. We are concerned with what people will think and say about us. We are concerned with what people may do to us. They may turn their back on us if we do not turn from Christ. As you recall, Peter denied Christ in fear of his personal safety. What is the focus of your life? Are you just focusing on the present, physical and earthly life, or are you living for eternity?

I believe this text of Scripture is a great challenge to mission service. Someone has said, "The first work of the whole church is to give the gospel to the whole world." To be honest, I believe many who are called into the ministry stay in America because of personal safety and prosperity. You can be killed on the mission field. Some of our Southern Baptist missionaries were recently killed in Iraq. Mission service often means living without the comforts and prosperity of America. But a God-called, committed missionary says, "None of these things move me." What about you? Is God calling anyone here today to go to the mission field? Is your mission in life to carry the gospel to the world? If so, you will go if your greatest goal in life is to please God, and win souls.

Let's suppose you accept God's call upon your life, and you enter the race. You begin to

serve God and others through the ministry of the church. What else should we keep in mind?

IV. WE SHOULD HAVE THE PROPER MOTIVATION TO FULFILL OUR MISSION

Paul certainly was motivated. Notice in v.22 he says that he is going to Jerusalem bound “in the spirit.” By using the small “s”, the translators believed that Paul's human spirit is meant. He felt an inner compulsion in his soul to go to Jerusalem. Actually, the word “spirit” has the definite article, “the Spirit.” Paul may have felt that the Holy Spirit was compelling him to go to Jerusalem.³ Regardless, you can't deny that he was inwardly driven by a sense of mission, and motivated.

But what did motivate Paul? What should motivate us to fulfill our mission in life?

A. To Please Jesus, and Win a Reward – In v. 24b he talks about “the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus.” Jesus Christ had personally revealed Himself to Paul on the road to Damascus, and had given him the task of being a light to the Gentiles. The fact that the ministry came from Christ can make a great deal of difference. If a stranger on the street asks me to do something, then I may do it. But if my wife Cheryl asks me to do something, I'm much more likely to do it. She is committed to me, and I should certainly be committed to her! Jesus proved His love and commitment to you when He died on the cross, and you should certainly do what He asks! Indeed, if the King of Kings asks you to do something, you had better do it. Paul was devoted to a great Person and motivated by a great purpose.

B. To Discharge Responsibility for the Eternal Destiny of Others – Notice what else he says in vv.26-27, “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.” This is the same thing we learned about in Acts 18:6, where he told some Jews who had rejected his message, “Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

Clearly, Ezek. 3:17-18 is the basis of Paul's statement here. There we read, “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel...” He likened his calling to that of a watchman on a city wall. Back in those days cities were protect from enemy attack by high walls. But another aspect of their protection was the watchman on the wall. Sometime an enemy army would try to sneak up on the city and attack by night. The watchman was to stay away, and warn of the danger. Even so, God said to Ezekiel the prophet, “When I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand.” Paul believed that God actually holds believers responsible for warning our fellow man. That is why he was willing to face suffering, and even death, for God would hold him responsible for warning people of a devil's hell, and telling people of the wonderful gospel of salvation by grace, freely given to all who believe in Jesus.

As Paul indicated in v.27, Paul was clean from the blood of all men, for he had fully preached the whole counsel of God. “Counsel” means “will, purpose.” Paul especially has in mind the purpose of God respecting salvation of men through Christ. He also did not withhold the sterner aspects of the truth of God, such as the fact that rejecting the grace of God will certainly bring judgment. Paul did not seek to win popularity from men. If people do not heed the gospel message, their blood will be on their own heads (cf. Acts 18:6).

On the other hand, it is a solemn thought that if we let either cowardice, or love of ease, and

³ Acts 19:21 says, “When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit... to go to Jerusalem...”

the good opinion of men hold us back from speaking out all that we know of God's truth, our hands are reddened with the blood of souls. Indeed, Paul's intent in speaking of this is that we might follow his example. Surely, he was encouraging the preachers of Ephesus to be faithful to their calling to win souls.

I wonder what it will be like at the Judgment Seat of Christ for many Christians? There will be some preachers who will answer to God for not warning people of hell. Some never preach about it. They only preach the love of God, and never mention the wrath of God. There have been some Christians who have sat on the sidelines, and done nothing to reach others for Christ, or even to support others who are. In some ways I hope that we Christians will not have to witness the Great White Throne Judgment, where all unbelievers will be judged. If so, could it be that many will turn to some Christian who is watching, and say to them as they are carried off to hell, "Why didn't you warn me about hell? Why didn't you tell me about Jesus?"

V. WE SHOULD COMPLETE OUR MISSION IN LIFE

Again, in v.24 Paul says, "that I may finish (*teleioo*) my race...." This takes us back to the athletic analogy. Paul sees himself as a runner in a distance race, keeping his eyes on his task, and that is to finish the race.

Now the fact that Paul compared his life to a race, this implies several truths for us:

A. We Must Follow the Track [Omit?] – There is a course or track that we must stay on. In a race, you must stay on the prescribed course. You cannot take a short-cut. Even so, the will of God as revealed in the Word of God is like a track that we must stay on when we run the race of life. You calling in life is your track. Stay on course. God's ultimate will for your life is that you be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. There are many temptations to draw us off track. If we get out of the will of God, if we get off track, we are sure to suffer the consequences. Oh, that we would maintain a solemn sense of duty like that of Paul. We should cultivate the continual sense that life is a course - a series of definite duties marked out for us by God. There are many temptations along the way to draw us away from God, but I appeal to you, stay on track!

B. We Must Make Progress Toward a Destination - This course implies that a fair distance will be covered. When I was in the marching band, we used to march in place, doing a great deal of activity but making no progress. Some Christians are like that. But you can't really just march in place spiritually. If you are not advancing in your personal relationship with the Lord, you are going to backslide. Are you obeying God more and sinning less? Are you growing?

C. We Must Have Endurance - Service to God is like a distance race, not a 50 yard dash. The main idea in a distance race is not speed, but endurance. We must not drop out like John Mark did. We must not turn back, like Demas did (2 Tim. 4:10). Unless we are prepared for the dust and heat of the race, we had better not start upon the course. Parents, your mission is indeed like a distance race. Raising children does not take a few months, as in a puppy, but it takes about 20 years! Staying married is an even longer distance race. It requires commitment & endurance, even when times are tough. And serving God is a distance race. I do not know of anything in Scripture that says that you retire from serving God. As long as you have some measure of health in body and mind, you should keep serving God until you cross the finish line of heaven! Rev. 14:13 says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on... that they may rest from their labors...."

Death is the time to rest from serving the Lord!

I believe we should be like a postage stamp. It is always ready for service, doesn't give up when it's licked, goes where it's sent, and sticks to its task until it is done. [Sparks].

What is it that will keep us going in the race? We not only need a sense of mission, but we need one more important factor to finish the race:

Conclusion - Paul wanted to stay true to the very end. In fact, Paul did just that. In 2 Tim. 4:7 he could write, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

Wouldn't you like to be able to say that at the end of your life?

And by the way, always remember that there is a finish line out there! When I was in the 10th grade I ran the 2 mile run. That was a long, grueling race. At times it seems the finish line would never arrive. My body would want to stop and rest. But I kept going, for I knew that a finish line would be reached, and then I could rest. Some day we will be able to rest from our labors, and we will receive our reward. In races, athletes are not rewarded on field level, but called up to the stage for reward. In our earthly race, we are rarely rewarded very much on earth, but we will be rewarded in heaven! But in the mean time, our attitude should be, "Though no one joins me, still I will follow."

I may be speaking to some here today who have dropped out of the race of Christian ministry. You used to be active in serving the Lord, but now you are not. Why not get back in the race. God will forgive you. He will renew your sense of mission. Why not make yourself available for Christian service once again? Some may sense this morning a call to be a missionary, or a call to be a preacher, or a call for some other kind of fulltime Christian service. Why not publicly commit to that this morning. Get on the starting line today. Some this morning are not in the race at all. You have never truly trusted in Jesus as Savior. I have warned you of the consequences of rejecting Christ. I have shared the gospel. Why not turn from sin, and trust in Jesus today!

Sources: F.F. Bruce; H. Leo. Eddleman; Oliver B. Greene; Everett F. Harrison; H.A. Ironside; Alexander Maclaren; Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Griffith Thomas; Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text); Warren W. Wiersbe, "*Be*" *Series: New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, Acts* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).