

Paul's Tombstone

Acts 20:17–38

Back a few years (closer to 20 years) everyone was reading the book “7 habits of highly effective people.” It was/is a pretty helpful book generally, but one of the 7 habits Covey (the author) suggested was ‘**begin with the end in mind**’.

In this chapter he suggested an exercise to write your own epitaph, or eulogy considering what people might say at your funeral. Covey suggested that you consider this exercise from the perspectives of four speakers who are going to be at your funeral. One from your family, one from your circle of friends, one from your place of employment and one from your church.

- What would you like each of those speakers to say about you and your life?
- What characteristics would you like them to have seen in you?
- What contributions would you want them to remember?
- What stories would you want them to relate?

When my wife read this chapter she did this exercise very enthusiastically and because of that she dragged me and the kids off to Bangladesh for 5 years, she had always wanted to do mission work and didn't want to get to the end having not given it a good shot!

What do you want the summation of your life to be? Today we are going to look at 4 things that I think Paul might have wanted written on his tombstone. (Of course, they are not on his tombstone, because Paul had no tombstone. We don't know what happened to his body, but he was beheaded by Nero in Rome and scholars guess that his body was most likely eaten by dogs.)

I take them from Acts 20. We have been going through Acts this year and Acts 20 is a farewell speech Paul gave to the Ephesian elders.

But these 4 things are what I think he might have wanted on his tombstone; because here in Acts 20 Paul is summarizing his whole philosophy of life to these elders he'll never see again.

The passage I want to look at is Acts 20:17–38 but I want to start at verse 7

⁷ On the first day of the week, we gathered with the local believers to share in the Lord's Supper. Paul was preaching to them, and since he was leaving the next day, he kept talking until midnight. ⁸ The upstairs room

where we met was lighted with many flickering lamps. ⁹As Paul spoke on and on, a young man named Eutychus, sitting on the windowsill, became very drowsy. Finally, he fell sound asleep and dropped three stories to his death below.

This has nothing to do with my message today, but I read it because it is awesome.

And, some of you think I preach too long sometimes? Paul started his sermon in the afternoon and preached past midnight until a guy fell out of the window and died. Until someone falls out a window - stop complaining.

¹⁰ Paul went down, bent over him, and took him into his arms. "Don't worry," he said, "he's alive!"

And so Paul raises this kid from the dead. And then the best part...

¹¹ Then they all went back upstairs, shared in the Lord's Supper, and ate together. Paul continued talking to them until dawn.

Anyway that is just a fascinating distraction from what I want to say, let's get to Paul's farewell speech.

*¹⁷But when we landed at Miletus, he sent a message to the elders of the church at Ephesus, asking them to come and meet him.
(Ephesus is where Paul had spent the last 3 years)*

¹⁸When they arrived he declared, "You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now ¹⁹I have done the Lord's work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews. ²⁰I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. ²¹I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike—the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus.

²²"And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don't know what awaits me, ²³except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. ²⁴But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.

²⁵ "And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ I declare today that I have been faithful. If anyone suffers eternal death, it's not my fault, ²⁷ for I didn't shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know.

²⁸ "So guard yourselves and God's people. Feed and shepherd God's flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders. ²⁹ I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. ³¹ Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you.

³² "And now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself.

³³ "I have never coveted anyone's silver or gold or fine clothes. ³⁴ You know that these hands of mine have worked to supply my own needs and even the needs of those who were with me. ³⁵ And I have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

³⁶ When he had finished speaking, he knelt and prayed with them. ³⁷ They all cried as they embraced and kissed him good-bye. ³⁸ They were sad most of all because he had said that they would never see him again. Then they escorted him down to the ship.

4 statements from Paul's farewell speech:

1. I have been faithful to do what Jesus told me to do

Paul says "From the first day I set foot in Asia my focus has been to do what God has told me to do... No threats or dangers deter me, he says, I just want to do what he has told me."

At the end of the day, that is all that any of us are really responsible for. To do what has God called you to do? You're not responsible to save the world; you are responsible to fulfil the assignments/call God has given to you.

Paul also said this in 1 Cor 4:2, “What is required of stewards is that they are found faithful.”

There are two ways Christians really go wrong with this.

- Some people feel like they are responsible to save the world—to fix their friends, ensure their kids turn out right, to make sure everyone is on track. They don’t see themselves as stewards of a ministry which belongs to God; They wouldn’t say this out loud but their behaviour is such that it is as though God has left the planet and it is all up to them to do everything.
- At the other end, some people never even stop to think about what responsibilities that they have been given by God, they claim the verse ‘*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*’, and they are just going to live it, but it tends to be for themselves. They forget about Romans 12 *Therefore I urge you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.*

What God requires of each of us is faithfulness in what he has assigned to us.

One book on evangelism is Bill Hybel’s, *Just Walk Across the Room*. He says evangelism, shouldn’t be scary to us; it is just obeying God’s prompting to walk across the room and ask someone a question. In it, he says,

“Being used by God means walking across the room when the Spirit tells us to walk, and we don’t walk when the Spirit says not to....

I’ve had to learn the hard way that on some occasions, the Spirit asks me to be an ‘initiator.’ . . .

On other occasions, the Spirit asks me to play the middle guy, carrying around a watering can and helping quench a few thirsty souls.

Still other times, I’m supposed to pick really ripe fruit off the vine...

It used to discourage me that I didn’t always get to see the results, but at some point I began to accept the fact that the role I am supposed to play is, well, only the role I’m supposed to play.”

I’m not in charge of the Great Commission. I’m responsible to faithfully serve the roles that God has given me to play.

‘Success’ is an owner word; ‘faithfulness’ is a steward word. What God will ask each of us is whether we were faithful with what he gave us—whether we rose to the opportunities that he put before us; whether we fulfilled the roles that

he assigned to you; whether we utilised the talents and resources that he entrusted to us.

Success (if we need to use that word) in life is figuring out what God has called you to and being completely faithful in it.

2. I told the truth (vs. 20, 27)

Twice Paul says: [20] *I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear ...* [27] *I didn't shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know.*

Paul saw himself with one responsibility: to be the teller of truth. He wasn't responsible for the content of it; whether people liked it—he's only responsible to deliver it.

- Listen to this from Ezekiel 33:7-9, ⁷“Now, son of man, (God is speaking to Ezekiel the prophet) I am making you a watchman for the people of Israel. Therefore, listen to what I say and warn them for me. ⁸If I announce that some wicked people are sure to die and you fail to tell them to change their ways, then they will die in their sins, and I will hold you responsible for their deaths. ⁹But if you warn them to repent and they don't repent, they will die in their sins, but you will have saved yourself.”

The gospel is that we (humanity) are separated from God because of our rebellion, and there's nothing we can do about that. But God so loved the world, anyway, that in grace and love he did for us what we could never do for ourselves, by living and dying and rising so we might be restored to him.

That is the truth, I'm not responsible for how you respond to that; I'm responsible just for telling you in the clearest and most appropriate way.

Truth with wisdom

Somehow, and we need to be very wise about how, we need to be clear with our friends and family about God's word to them?

Understand that this doesn't mean we have to make them all believe... or that we grind them into the ground—that every time you see your non Christian friend you've got your finger in their face... all Paul said was, *“I didn't shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know.”* He hadn't persuaded them all; he was leaving with a lot of them unconverted. But he had been clear.

That's the question we need to ask ourselves, especially when we use that well known quote *Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary*: Have we been clear?

Truth with compassion

And notice: What characterized Paul's attitude was tears, not anger. Vs. 19: *I have done the Lord's work humbly and with many tears*. And in vs. 31: *Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you*.

- For many of us, our attitude toward friends and family who don't know Jesus can sometimes swing between apathy and frustration. Does your presentation of the truth flow with tears?
- What makes you cry? Do you weep over your lost friends and family? Do they know that? Do you weep over nations and villages that are lost without the good news of Jesus?

3. I directed people's attention toward Jesus, (v. 19,21)

¹⁹I have done the Lord's work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews.

²¹I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike—the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus.

I confess that I do not watch a lot of Christian TV, I watch a fair bit of TV, just not Christian stuff. But the bits and pieces I have seen I get a bit tired of the "rah rah, victory, power and joy" that many leaders talk about. For me it does not fit with reality of life. How Paul describes his ministry experience is more realistic to me "Humility, tears, and trials".

- that word, "humility" in vs. 19, was a common one in Greek, and it was always used negatively—It was usually an insult. It meant low, defeated, weak. But the word is used 200 times in the Bible, and it's almost always considered a virtue.
- Why? Because Christian ministry is not about extraordinary men and women of great character worthy to be praised, but about a great Saviour who can save the weakest, and most broken, and most guilty of sinners.

Paul doesn't want to leave them with an example to admire, but a Saviour to trust in. Listen to Tim Keller

“A humble or weak person will show a crucified saviour better to a listener than a polished, pulled together expert. Because that’s how it happened for us: we weren’t saved by pulling ourselves together, but by admitting we were sinners and calling on the one who was pulled apart for us.”

I think about how much different today’s leaders are presented. Today we say, “Great leaders are people of power, triumph, positivity, and happiness.” Is it possible that the ones that God sees as great leaders, and the ones we see as great leaders, are different?

4. I finished strong (vs. 24)

After explaining that the Holy Spirit has told him that only beating and imprisonments await him in the future, Paul says, (vs. 24), *“But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus.”*

Many people start well, but they don’t persevere on to finish. They are like one-hit Christian wonders. In ministry I think there are 3 things that often keep people from finishing strong:

- **Pain:** I am not talking about physical pain, but the pain when people you are ministering to don’t appreciate you or what you are doing. It’s easy to quit then. Paul had been taken advantage of; forgotten about; betrayed; ripped off. But he kept going.
- **Tiredness:** Not in the sense you get after a hard but effective days’ work, but the sense that ‘it’s just not working’. No one is listening. Paul was like that. His sermons sometimes ended in couple of people showing some interest... other times they ended with people trying to stone him. But he kept going.

But the main reason people have trouble finishing.

- **Divided hearts:** You know you should complete the assignment that Jesus gave to you, but other things start pulling at your heart:
 - I want to follow Jesus, but I love comfort.
 - I want to do what Jesus says, but I also want to live here, own that.
 - I want to follow Jesus, but I want to be with her/him.
 - I want to stand with Jesus, but I really need their approval.

Those divided loves keep us from finishing.

I don't have an easy answer to those challenges in following Jesus – apart from saying it's not meant to be easy, but we finish (and can I mix my metaphors) the same way as you eat an elephant, one mouthful at a time, you follow Jesus one step at a time.

Where do you get the strength to finish? Not by looking far ahead but by looking at the next step.

- One step closer to Jesus...

4 things I hope might be said about me at my funeral:

- I have been faithful to do all that Jesus told me to do
- I told the truth
- I directed people's attention toward Jesus
- I finished strong