

Awaken: Week 1
Acts 20
January 27, 2008

Having a child that has started school has been a huge adjustment for me. It has brought many challenges that I had not experienced before. Bethany gets home between 4:00 and 4:15 each day from school. She might take a short break to have a snack or play with her sister for a minute – but it is a very short break. After that she begins working on her homework for the day. As I finish my workday around 6pm, she is just finishing her homework and we usually try to eat as quickly as we can. Eating dinner as a family of four is not the most relaxing time to discuss the activities of our day. I feel like we are catching food being thrown across the room by our little one or reminding Bethany to chew with her mouth closed. It can be like a real circus sometimes and we are still in training with number three on the way. Sometimes I think we could have our own reality show. We finish eating and get things cleaned up and it is usually close to 7pm. Avery goes to bed at 7:30 and Bethany usually goes to bed at 8pm. When I begin to add that up in light of the short amount of time that I will get to have my wonderful children in my home, I get a bit concerned.

A piece of advice that I receive pretty regularly from those who are empty nesters is to cherish the time the kids are at home because it passes in the blink of an eye. I am beginning to understand what they mean because it seems impossible that my baby girl is completing the first grade and that we are quickly approaching her 7th birthday. I did a little math this week that is not complicated – you could do it at home. I took the two hours per day that I see her and added in the weekend hours and came up with an amount for the week. Then I multiplied it out for the year and I realized that for every 365 days that pass I get about 54. When you begin to look at the end result of what we are giving our life to it can drastically change the way we make our choices.

I think that our Father, the creator of the universe, looks at us knowing the finality and fragility of life and his heart is broken. I think he looks down many times at what we are doing and what we are investing ourselves in and he mourns the same way that I do when I realize how precious and short my time is with my children. How enormous is the Father's grace that he doesn't grab a thousand watt megaphone and stick it in our ear screaming at the top of his lungs for us to WAKE UP? Our entire life can fly by as fast as a good night's sleep if we don't wake up and begin living an intentional life – the life that we were created to live. Just ask yourself the question, "What if you had to say goodbye right now?" If this whole big thing that you have been doing with your life were done right now, how would you feel and what would you have to say?

The people at the church of Ephesus were very close to Paul. He had labored with them for three years. He suffered with them and rejoiced with them. They worked together through times when everything was going well and times when things were very difficult and quitting would have been the easiest option. He was very close to this group of people. They had never heard of Jesus before Paul arrived. He taught them the stories of Jesus and he brought to them opportunity to live life in a relationship with Jesus. Paul's time in Ephesus had ended and he

knew, as we will read, that he would never see his friends again. In chapter 20 of Acts we find the final words of Paul to his co-laborers in Ephesus.

Acts chapter 20 begins with a travelogue and if we lived around these places then it might be interesting to you but we don't so we will not dwell on the routes he took to arrive at his destination. It would be like reading that Paul went to get coffee at Starbucks in La Centerra, dropped by HEB on Fry, and then swung by Target on Westheimer Parkway. It was interesting to his hearers where he had been because most of them had been to the same places. In verses 7-12 we have a short story that we will return to in just a few minutes. After another short travelogue in verses 13-16 we arrive at Paul's farewell. In verse 17 Paul calls together the Elders of the church. There are only two leadership offices that existed within the New Testament church. There were elders and deacons. An Elder's role was in Doctrine, Discipline, Direction, and Distinction. Paul gathers the elders together so that he can tell them goodbye.

It is obvious that Paul is emotional during this farewell. When I say emotional I am talking about the seriousness by which he speaks to them. He begins with an emphatic "you" that gives us the clue regarding his emotion. Paul wants them to recall what they remember of his work with them. Although he will describe to them what he has done and why he has done it, he wants them to remember so that his actions would be the proof behind his words. He describes his time with them as serving the Lord "with all humility." Although Paul deeply loved the people of Ephesus, he was not serving the people of Ephesus. Paul was also not trying to become known as the most radical follower of Christ in the entire ancient near east. Paul was serving the Lord. Everything that he did, he did it to serve the Lord – not self or anyone else. It might seem odd that Paul is bragging about his humility. I do not think that Paul is talking about the kind of humility that is an antonym of pride. Rather, I think Paul is saying that he served the Lord in their midst through very humble circumstances. We have seen many of these humble circumstances as Paul was almost killed in Acts 9, 13, 14, 17, 18, & 19.

Even though he stared death in the face over and over again, he "did not shrink back from declaring" the truth to those around him. Paul's message was not a popular message. It was difficult for Paul. We can see this in Philippians when he talks about wrestling with continuing to live. His flesh just wanted to be with the Lord but he knew that his work was not finished and that he must continue to finish what he started. The life that God calls us to live is not a life of popularity and favor. There are many times that we must say and do things that are not the easy things to do. Fathers, there are many times that you must say something to your son or daughter that is not what they want to hear. Men, sometimes we need to put our man pants on and go up to a friend and ask him a hard question. Paul is saying that he never hid from what he was called to do.

In verse 22 he begins with the word "behold." This communicates to us that what he was about to say to his friends was probably a surprise. This word communicates an unexpected emotion. He says, "behold, I am going to Jerusalem." He goes on to tell them that he doesn't really know why he has to go but he is sure that God wants him to go. He does not have all the answers regarding what awaits him but he knows that he must go. We discussed this last week as we talked about Acts 16 when Paul has the vision from the man of Macedonia. We also talked about God calling Abraham to go in Genesis 12. This is a pattern that we see throughout the pages of scripture. God is looking for our obedience and as our faith can handle it, he reveals

the next turns on the path. Paul doesn't know much but he does know one thing, "the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me."

Paul is not living life on his terms. Paul is not looking to live the most comfortable and wealthy life that he can live. Paul hungers to live a life of purpose and he knows that the only answer to that desire is to live life for God's purpose. Paul has experienced life without Jesus and he found it empty. Paul has such great purpose now that he writes in Philippians 1:21, "to live is Christ and to die is gain." Paul is so wrapped up in purpose that he has to be reminded sometimes to keep on living – it isn't quite time to be with the Father yet. In verse 24 he says, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus." In 2 Timothy 4:6 Paul writes, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Finishing was hard for Paul and finishing is hard for us. If you are willing to wake up to the life God has called you to live you will find difficulty. If we are willing to wake up from this cycle of flushing the hours of our life down the toilet, then God will bless it but he will not make it easy. Friends, while on the journey of following Christ you will get hurt, tired, and burnt out. While serving in ministry, whether at this church or any other, you will get hurt, tired, and burnt out. Now, we can run away from the difficulty as so many have or we can continue the fight by pushing ahead as Paul describes.

After telling them in verse 25 that he will never see them again, Paul says what I believe are the most difficult words to grapple with in this entire address. Paul says, "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." To understand this we have to look at Ezekiel 31. Ezekiel 31:1-6 describes a military situation in which a watchman is tasked with guarding a perimeter. The watchman must tell the people when they are in danger. If the watchman tells the people they are in danger and they do not respond accordingly, then the watchman is innocent because he has done his job. The blood is not on his hands but rather on those who were warned and chose not to respond.

Paul is saying that he was their spiritual watchman and the blood is not on his hands because he has declared the whole counsel of God. And, if this reality and his example before them are not taken seriously then he accuses them of devaluing the cross. In verses 26-28 Paul is saying that Christ died on the cross for people that we live and work with and all he is asking you and me to do is tell Christ's story. He gave up his life and we just have to tell people about it. This is what Paul gave his life to do. In verse 31 he says, "Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears." If you look back at verses 7-12 we have a great illustration of this reality.

This is one sermon that I would love to have heard. His listeners gather together and had eaten, and then Paul begins to speak. Boy did he begin to preach. The text says in verse 7 that he "prolonged his speech until midnight." Luke describes the lamps being present because there would have been no electricity. So, if you can imagine being on the third floor of a structure in room that would not have been very large. There are so many people packed into this little room that one guy is sitting in a window sill. Of course at this time a window sill is merely an opening in the middle of a wall. But, there they all are and Paul is bringing the word. He is preaching! If

you are wondering what Paul could have been talking about for so long you only have to look a little farther to 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. In verse 4 he says, “and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” Paul is preaching the Word, the stories and teachings of Jesus, all night long. I wish we had the discipline to listen the way these guys did in the first century world. Today because of media and our other stimulants, it is pushing things to the max for us to listen for one hour much less eight.

Anyway, back to our story in Acts 20, Paul is giving the mother of all sermons and Eutychus has fallen asleep. He falls asleep sitting in the window sill and ends up falling out of the third story window to the ground. Although Luke describes him as “taken up dead” we cannot know for sure if he was dead or looked as though he was dead. Paul stops what he is doing and rushed down to Eutychus on the ground to pick him up and says, “Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.” Then, Paul heads back up to the third floor and finishes what he started. So, when Paul says in verse 31 that he did not cease “night or day” in admonishing the people, he was not kidding around. Paul did not live a compartmentalized life. There wasn’t the Paul that helped out at church on Sundays and the Paul that hung out in the Marketplace. There was one Paul who lived one life whether he was in the synagogues, homes, or anywhere else. Paul had awakened to a life of purpose on the road to Damascus in Acts 9.

Do you get the picture here that Paul is saying he left it all on the field? Do you hear his message as he is describing the intention with which he did everything while he was in Ephesus? Paul is saying that he did not waste a minute of his time there with them. He finishes the address by exhorting them to be givers. He quotes Jesus in saying, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” I don’t know about you guys but it is exhausting to me as I read through Paul’s words. I am exhausted and convicted.

I can feel the voice of the Father on the back of my neck yelling at me to awaken to a life that he offers and desires. I am plagued by the question who am I serving? When I serve his church or in the community am I doing it to serve the Lord or I am I doing it for some selfish gain? How obedient am I? Do I have a faith enough to jump in obedience to the Father in all of those moments when I have no answers to what lies ahead? Or as Paul described, do I have the faith to move ahead in obedience when I do know that I am moving into great difficulty? Do I have the endurance to finish even though I know that I will get hurt, tired, and burnt out? And last, whose blood is on my hands?

As you have heard it said before, there are two things in life that are certain and those are death and taxes. Friends, our days are numbered and those numbers are flying by at an extraordinary rate. So many people realize one day that their life has flown by and they lay on their deathbed wishing that they had lived differently. They see the temporal things that drove their days and they wish that they had invested in things eternal. What if you had to say goodbye today? What would you regret? Maybe like me you are realizing that nothing in this life that takes up your time is worth sacrificing the few moments we have with our children. Maybe like me you are realizing that unless I change something then I will be at a high school graduation wishing that I had done things differently. Or maybe, also like me, you are realizing that you have some blood on your hands. Maybe we have not been the watchmen that God has called us

to be. Can you hear the Father beckoning you to awaken from the sleep of the world and embrace the life that he has created you to live?

Has there been a time in your life when you have had to wait a long time? Maybe when you were young and you were waiting to get your driver's license and it seemed like you would never turn 16? Or, maybe when you were waiting for that acceptance letter to come in the mail from the college you always wanted to attend? Or it may be fresh in some of your minds that long wait of engagement... you have a wedding date picked out and it seems like it is never going to arrive. We have those times in life where one day feels like seven because we are looking ahead and waiting for some desired outcome. So many people live their entire lives that way – thinking we have an eternity to live. But, once we begin to look back and realize it has been 5, 10, or 20 years since we graduated from high school, or we notice how quickly our children are growing up – either way we begin to see that we don't live an immortal life. Friends, life really doesn't last forever. You might be thinking that your lifestyle is only for a season only to wake up on your deathbed to a different reality. God is screaming to all of us to awaken from the slumber of monotony to the life that he created us to live – a life in love with him and following obediently wherever he calls us to go.

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Small Group Discussion

1. What circumstances have caused you to think about the fragility of life?
2. If your life were a screenplay, what would be the central theme? What would be the most exciting/interesting part of the film?
3. How would you feel if you knew the film was going to end tomorrow? Would you be satisfied? Are there things you know that you need to do which you have not done yet? What are you waiting for?
4. In verse 20 Paul talks about not shrinking back from that which God desires. What are some ways, in our culture, we shrink back from the selfless life God desires us to live? (*Matthew 16:24ff – If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*)
5. In verses 22-23 Paul describes the risks he faces going to Jerusalem. Do you consider yourself a risk taker? Have there been things that you felt God was calling you to do that scared you?
6. What thoughts come to mind when you read Paul's words in verse 26 (*I am innocent of the blood of all of you...*)? Does this statement make you feel at all uncomfortable? Or does it at least force you to introspection as you try to decipher if your hands are innocent as Paul's were?
7. What is your life wrapped up in? If someone examined your life would they see the cycle of the culture or something very different? Are there things you can do to wake up each day choosing to live your life with the end in mind – the end we will face before the Father?