

The Name That Brings Life

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening, folks. Good evening. And I want you to know, I forgive you if you've ever fallen asleep in church. So we're in the Book of Acts. Do you know when the Book of Acts was first written, there was probably only a couple thousand Christians, like in total, in the world. By 350 AD, there was 35 million Christians in the Roman Empire.

35 million. So that was about 50 or 60% of the entire population there of the Roman Empire. And just to remind you, from between when Acts was written and 350 AD, for huge chunks of that time, Christians were tremendously persecuted. So how do we account for that?

Like, how do we account for that kind of growth going from a couple of thousand to tens of millions? Well, Luke in Acts gives us part of the reason, a part of the reason. And part of the reason was the ministry of the Apostle Paul. He invested in a network of churches that became so widespread, it took over the Roman Empire. During the last six weeks, we've been looking at Paul's grand adventure. And we've kind of danced across the book, looking at his sort of missionary exploits. And as we come to the end of the series, I hope you don't get the impression that Paul was some sort of showy evangelist who kind of blew into town and preached, did some cool stuff and then jetted. No, I mean, he loved evangelism, but he was deeply, deeply concerned about church planting. And planting churches that would flourish and grow and multiply themselves. So he'd plant them and he'd keep going back to invest in them. And that's why if you look at a map of Paul's missionary journeys, it's very scattered and scribbly because he's repeatedly going back to the same places. So he's not some kind of one night gig evangelist.

He loved the communities of faith and he wanted to see them healthy and passionate about the gospel. And this is one of the big reasons why the Christian faith, despite hundreds of years of persecution, became the predominant religion in the Roman Empire within the space of a couple of hundred years. All that to say, tonight in Acts 20, we get a little snapshot of Paul's love for all of these little churches. We see in verse 17, Paul's on his way to Jerusalem, but he stops off near Ephesus to get together with some folks from a church that he planted there. And it was a church plant that he actually spent three years. He spent three years in this place encouraging them, teaching them, praying with them. So he ranges to meet with them. And after getting them all together, what does he say to them? Well, that's verses 18 to 24. It's a short sermon that he preaches. And I think you could summarize that sermon in a number of ways, but I think the best way to summarize that sermon is to say this. Paul talks to them about, one, the gift of the word, the gift of the word, and two, the gift of a life, the gift of a word, and two, the gift of a life.

Let's start with the gift of a word. So listen to verse 20 here. I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. So Paul had this comprehensive word ministry. He spent his life telling people the truth in forums and markets and homes to groups, to individuals, to Jews, to Gentiles. And he told them the whole counsel of God. He told them everything. He didn't hold back from the tough stuff. Do you see how he says there, I did not shrink from declaring. He didn't trim the gospel to avoid the difficult things. It wasn't a vacuous gospel designed to sort of just, you know, tickle your fancy. It was comprehensive. And preaching was so important to them. And even when a kid, you know, fell off the third story floor and died and was raised from the dead, what did

[4 : 38] Paul do afterwards? He just got back into it. Just got back into it and preached till midnight. And here at St. John's, we place a huge emphasis on preaching. You know that. And why do we do that?

Well, let me just say it as simply as I can. The Bible is the word of God. So on Sundays, when I open my mouth, I'm trying to say what is there. The big lesson here is you don't build strong churches without a comprehensive preaching ministry. So Paul gave them the gift of God's truth.

He also gave them the gift of a life. And it was his life that he gave to them. This is the second major point. Christ gave Paul a new life on the road to Emmaus. You know this story. And Paul spent his days giving that life away. Now, what did that look like? Well, it looked like a lot of things.

Let's have a look at a few of those things that it looks like from the passage. Verse 22. And now behold, I'm going to Jerusalem constrained by the Spirit.

So a life that is given away is a life lived in step and submissive to the Spirit. It's a life where your goals and your ambitions are submitted to God's leading. Does that sound hard? Yeah, I think it can be really hard. Listen to the end of the passage. I'll read the whole thing again with the last section of it.

[6 : 16] And now behold, I'm going to Jerusalem constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me. So a life given away is Spirit-led. And it's a life content with not knowing what the future holds.

Because you know who holds that future. God holds that future. I came to Regent College in 2005 with literally my life savings and, you know, like a backpack. I had enough money to live for about 18 months. I had no idea what the future held for me, but I knew I was supposed to be there. That was 15 years ago. A life given to Jesus is a life content with not knowing what the future holds. Because you know who holds that future. Now look at verse 23. The Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. So Paul says the future is uncertain, but he's got a pretty good idea of one thing that the future holds. And it's suffering. A life given away is a life that is courageous enough to keep going when God asks you to do something difficult, when God asks you to do something hard.

This is just all so counterintuitive, isn't it? Because isn't the good life the one that's really planned out, it's comfortable, and the goal is, you know, maximizing your joy, right?

The Christian way seems all upside down, doesn't it? But it's actually the right way up if you want life and you actually want joy. Now Paul is no sort of, you know, grin and bear it, sort of stoic.

[8 : 36] And he wept, and he did it openly. You know, in his leadership, there was tremendous vulnerability. This is also a mark of a life given away. It's a real life. It's an open life. It's an honest life.

That's a terrible way to think. That's not a good way to think about yourself. And, you know, it's true that there are, there is a way of thinking about yourself that's really hateful and awful, and it really is just very damaging.

And that priority is testimony, is testifying to the gospel of grace. That's very challenging stuff, isn't it? Just to end here, a reminder, we are not full-time ministers like Paul. Most of us are not full-time ministers like Paul.

And that's to make the grace of God through Jesus known. And to give our lives serving not just our worldly communities that we're in, which is fine, but also serving the communities of faith so that they can flourish and that they can grow. Amen.