

“FAITHFULNESS IS NOT ALWAYS EASY”

Ezekiel 18:5-9, Hebrews 13:1-9, Acts 21:1-16

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“When Chris Spielman played for the Buffalo Bills, he was everything a middle linebacker should be: tough, strong, and smart, with passion, total commitment, and loyalty to the game. He played the entire 1995 season with a torn pectoral muscle that he sustained in the season opener.

“But the game took a distant second place in his thinking during the 1998 season. He chose to stay home. He cooked, took care of his kids, and cared for his wife--by choice. Stephanie, Chris's wife, was struggling through the stark reality of breast cancer. Surgery, chemotherapy, and nausea were Stephanie's opponents. During her fight, Chris was at her side. His actions supported his "family before job" credo.

“Asked by a reporter from the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* newspaper if he'd consider a return to the Bills late in the season, Spielman said, ‘I'd play in a heartbeat, but what kind of man would I be if I backed out on my word to my wife? I wouldn't be a man at all.’

“Football fans saw Spielman as a man because of his aggressive, leave-it-all-on-the-field style of play. But what really makes him a man? It's his personal sacrifice and unending commitment and loyalty to his wife.”¹

Faithfulness can be very difficult for us, because it demands we take our eyes off of ourselves, and begin looking at the needs of another. Chris made the commitment to “love, honor and cherish his wife for as long as they both lived.” That meant he was willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of his wife’s needs. He gave up a season of football so that she could be cared for at home. He let his own aspirations and desires go, so that he could accomplish a bigger need, caring for his wife and family.

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 173-174)

But this kind of mindset seems rare in our world today. The world is quick to tell you to look out for your own #1, to get all that you can, from whomever you can, in any way that you can, for as long as you can, and to think nothing of anyone else in the meantime. The world calls us to become so focused on ourselves that there is no more room for touching the life of another. And when we do that, our whole society becomes narcissistic, and it quickly falls apart.

Our text from Ezekiel 18 today gives us the Word of the Lord with regard to how a righteous man conducts himself. He stays true to his faith in the Lord, not toying with pagan idols or religions (18:6a). He stays true to his marriage commitment with his wife, and honors her even in very intimate ways (18:6b). He is faithful to repay all of his debts and is fair to those he does business with (18:7a). He is a wise steward of his resources, giving generously to those who are hungry or naked (18:7b). He lends without demanding interest (18:8a). He is quick to be a wise judge, bringing about justice (18:8b). He keeps the laws and commandments of the Lord God Almighty, and lives an abundant and long life (18:9). While he could live differently by the ways of the world, the righteous man conforms himself to the ways and guidelines of the Lord God so as to be a living witness to the value of following the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind and strength.

That is God's desire for all of us, to live righteously before Him and before others so that they might see God's goodness and mercy. If we live only by the ways of this world, which are in contrast to the ways of the Lord God, there is no difference between us and anyone else who does not claim to be a follower of the Lord. If we claim to be a true disciple of the Lord our God, it is vital that we be faithful to His laws and commands, and stand out as being radically different than the people of the world.

It is through our example that others will be able to see the importance of living

according to God's Word and following God's Law so that we all might find God's grace. It is through our faithfulness that we bring life to those around us as we reach out to them in their desperate need to find hope, beyond the death that they are facing. Let me give you an example.

Howard Hendricks gives us this illustration. "Drowning victims often fight their rescuers in the hysteria of that terrifying moment. The same is often true for those who are floundering spiritually because their faith has suffered shipwreck.

"A young man who strayed from the Lord was finally brought back by the help of a friend who really loved him. When there was full repentance and restoration, I asked this Christian how it felt while he was away from God. The young man said it seemed like he was out to sea, in deep water, in deep trouble, and all his friends were on the shoreline hurling accusations at him about justice, penalty, and wrong.

"But there was one Christian brother who actually swam out to get me and would not let me go. I fought him, but he pushed aside my fighting, grasped me, put a life jacket around me, and took me to shore. By the grace of God, he was the reason I was restored. He would not let me go."²

And that is what our Lesson of Hebrews 13 invites us to do - to live in such a way that others might see the goodness of God in us, and then reach out to them in order to save them from eternal death. The author of Hebrews says, "*Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering...Remember your leaders, who spoke the Word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and*

² (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll's Book of Illustrations*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998] pg. 487)

forever” (Hebrews 13:1-3, 7-8). In other words, love those around you enough to go out into the deep water of life to rescue them from the destruction that lies in their path if you do not help them. Care for those who are struggling, even if they fight against you, and let them see Christ in and through you in order to bring them back into a relationship with Jesus Christ our Savior.

Faithfulness demands we go beyond ourselves to touch the lives of the lost. It may not be easy - in fact it will most likely be difficult and dangerous - but the life of another is worth our effort to save them. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to even be willing to sacrifice ourselves for another. Jesus tells us, “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends*” (John 15:13). And who are those friends? Again, Jesus tells us to “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength ... and love your neighbor as yourself*” (Mark 12:30-31). So our neighbors are to be our friends that we love enough to give of ourselves for so that they might find life in Jesus.

That’s not always an easy thing to do. But it is a vital requirement for us if we are to consider ourselves true followers of Jesus Christ. We follow His commands.

Today, as we look at our next section of the Book of Acts, we see that Paul has committed himself to following Jesus, even to the point of death. Listen to our lesson today, Acts 21:1-16. (READ Acts 21:1-16)

Those in Tyre who had become believers in Jesus Christ were not pleased to hear that Paul was intent upon going to Jerusalem. Paul had already informed his traveling companions of what had been foretold him concerning what lay ahead in Jerusalem. He told them, “*I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me*” (Acts 20:23). So when the Tyrian Christians heard about this, being informed by the Holy Spirit themselves, they desperately tried to persuade Paul away from going to Jerusalem. They did not

understand what needed to take place in the lives of others that Paul would be connected with. They did not comprehend the work that still needed to be done for the sake of Jesus Christ, even in Rome. The followers of Jesus in Tyre only knew the difference that Paul had made in their lives and those around them, and they wanted Paul to be able to continue to do the work of presenting Jesus to the Jews and Gentiles.

However, Paul was faithful to the guiding of the Holy Spirit, and he had committed himself to going wherever the Spirit led. If that was Jerusalem, then he would go to Jerusalem. It sounds a lot like Elisha being told by the prophets in various communities that Elijah was going to be taken away from him that particular day. Yet Elisha had told them, “*Yes, I know ... so be quiet.*” (2 Kings 2:1-6). That information did not deter Elisha from following Elijah. Nor did the pleading of the followers of Jesus in Tyre dissuade Paul from going to Jerusalem.

Why did Paul want to face prison and hardships? Paul Lee Tan tells it this way. He says, “Back when I was a little boy, we worshipped in a church in East Houston, Texas, that had a big white sign with broad black letters that read, ‘Let go and Let God.’ I remember sitting there as a child and as a young adolescent looking at those words. In fact, I looked at them every Sunday for several years. ‘Let go and let God.’ They sounded real great, and I’m sure whoever put them up there wanted them to speak to everybody there.

“It’s a little dubious whether this is the origin, but it seems to be rather well documented: A college student back in the nineteenth century took six postcards and wrote a large letter on each one of the postcards: L-E-T-G-O-D. He then put them on the mantelpiece in his room where he was living at school. One evening a draft blew through the window and the ‘D’ blew away. As he picked it up, what he saw seemed to be a message from God, the secret of the

Christian life. Only by letting go can you let God carry out His will in your life.”³

The Apostle Paul understood this completely. God had a purpose for him that was not yet realized. We know about it as we continue to read through the Book of Acts. But at that time, Paul just needed to trust the Holy Spirit’s guidance, knowing that no matter what it led him to, he would continue to be faithful in doing the work of the Lord.

So there were many tears shed and prayers given as Paul and his companions left Tyre. The company then continued on toward Jerusalem, arriving at Caesarea a couple days later. And again, there were warnings given about what was ahead for Paul.

“*A prophet named Agabus came down from Judea*” (21:10), and warned everyone about Paul’s impending arrest and imprisonment. He said, “*The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles’*” (21:11).

And when everyone heard this, they desperately tried to talk Paul out of going to Jerusalem. Maybe it was a test to see the state of his resolve to be faithful to the Holy Spirit’s guidance. I don’t know, but it sure seemed right to the people at Caesarea. Why, if the Spirit had warned him of the impending doom ahead at Jerusalem, wouldn’t Paul avoid going there so that he could continue to minister to the churches throughout Asia and Greece? Couldn’t he be more useful to them alive rather than becoming bound up in prison?

But let me ask you, where were most of the Epistle Letters written from? Paul wrote them from prison, as he responded to the reports he received from fellow missionaries working in those cities and regions. Most of the New Testament that we have today were the writings of Paul, giving instruction to those who were living in freedom. Out of prison came the teachings to grow stronger in faith in Jesus Christ. Had Paul continued to travel around from place to

³ (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Book of Illustrations*, pg. 555)

place, we might never have had the instructions in how to live faithfully to Jesus Christ. God used the prison time that Paul faced to produce writings that would influence the lives of millions of people, all because Paul was faithful to follow the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Another thing we need to remember is that Paul was on a mission to Jerusalem. "The main purpose of this visit we know from Paul's letters: to hand over the collection which had been raised in the Gentile churches for the needs of the Jewish church in Jerusalem. Luke seems to have known about this collection and alludes to it...in Acts 24:17. Its purpose was twofold: to express the solidarity of the gentile churches with the parent Jewish church, and to bring assistance to the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem."⁴

So this wasn't just a journey on a whim, but had purpose to it. We'll see more about that next week. But Paul was not frightened nor worried about going to Jerusalem because Jesus had told him that He would be with him no matter where he went. As long as he was faithful, God would use him to do a great thing.

And that shows up in his response to the people who were trying to talk him out of going to Jerusalem. Paul says to them, "*Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the Name of the Lord Jesus*" (21:13).

But that is a very important statement for us to consider for our own lives, too. Are we ready and are we willing to be bound and even die for the Name of Jesus? Are we willing to give up our freedom to let the Holy Spirit work through us to reach even more people for the Lord? Are we willing to be misunderstood, or criticized, or ridiculed for living according to the ways that Jesus has commanded us to live? Are we willing to give up all of our own personal agendas in order to accomplish the work of the Lord in our world today? Are we willing to let go and let God use us where and how He will?

⁴ (A. E. Harvey, *Companion to the New Testament*, [Cambridge, G.B.: Oxford University Press, 1979] pg. 483)

I've known folks who followed the Holy Spirit's guidance to give up their luxury home and move into the Project Housing Apartments in Chicago so that they might minister to the least, the low and the lost who live there. I've known folks who have given up prestigious jobs in order to move to another country as missionaries to take the Gospel of Jesus to people who have never heard. I've known people who have put their own lives in jeopardy as they go into drug infested areas in order to bring the Light of Jesus into the darkness of that world. I've known people who have given up dead-end ministries in order to serve as a missionary to orphaned and discarded children in Honduras. I've known people who have given up their own dreams in order to follow God's guidance as His servants reaching out to homeless and abandoned people.

Faithfulness is not always easy. Many times it demands great things from us in order to accomplish much more than we could have ever hoped to have done on our own. The key is to keep your focus on the Lord Jesus, trust the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and don't let anyone talk you out of being a servant of the Lord our God. Let's pray.

Father, Thank You for Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ! Thank You for His call in each one of our hearts to be His disciples. Thank You for the work of the Holy Spirit in us to guide us and empower us to do what You have called us to do. Lord, give us the commitment to follow Your will. Give us the assurance we need to know that You have called us to be Your witnesses. Give us the heart to seek after You in all we do and say, so that we might be found faithful to You. Give us eyes to see those around us who need rescuing from their path toward death so that we might move into the deep waters of life to save them. Give us the heart to follow Jesus in everything we do so that we might bring others to Salvation. Give us the courage to do this, starting right now, today. This we pray in Jesus' great and powerful Name. AMEN.