

Acts Series Part 56

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[0 : 00] I'm not very keen on goodbyes, especially high-intensity farewells. If at all possible, I usually try and body swerve such occasions. All the hugging and kissing and crying, it's really not for me, I'm afraid. Maybe some of you can sympathize with me on that.

Well, as we rejoin Paul on his missionary journeys as they're recorded for us in the book of Acts, it's all hugging and kissing and crying as he says farewell to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, where he had called them to address them. I want you to, inasmuch as you're able, try and picture the scene as we read the verses describing the moment of farewell as they're recorded for us.

There in verse 36 at the end of chapter 20 of Acts, Paul has given his discourse, his farewell speech, and then we read, When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again.

Then they accompanied him to the ship. Well, that description of that very emotion-charged farewell begins with the words that we've read, When he had said this. I think it's reasonable to take that as a reference, not only to what he had said immediately before that, possibly the very words that we were sharing with the children, it is more blessed to give than to receive, but rather a reference to all that he had said in this farewell speech, if we can call it that. When he had said this, when he had spoken these words to the elders that he had gathered, then he knelt down with them and prayed. My concern today is to consider what was it that Paul said in this farewell speech. And in it, he does two things, essentially. He covers a lot of ground, but I think we can fairly divide what he says in two ways. First of all, he spends quite a considerable amount of time describing his own ministry amongst them. And then secondly, he also leaves them, the elders who are gathered there, with a word of exhortation as regards the care that they are to exercise for the church in Ephesus.

[2 : 57] And no doubt for some, that responsibility might have, in due course, extended beyond Ephesus. So, there's these two elements. He presents a self-portrait, as it were, of what he had done amongst them, his own ministry. And then he also gives them this charge, this exhortation, this task that they are to perform in and for the church in Ephesus. And in order to consider these two aspects, or these two parts of his speech, we are going to make use of both this morning and this evening.

And what we will do this morning is consider Paul's description of his ministry. That first part that we've suggested is included here. And we're going to consider it under the heading of a portrait of a servant of God. A portrait of a servant of God. It's a self-portrait by Paul of himself, but it serves a useful purpose in presenting to us a portrait of the servant of God more generally.

And then this evening, we will move on to Paul's description of the church that the elders are to care for. And there we have a portrait of the church of God. So, this morning, a portrait of the servant of God, and this evening, a portrait of the church of God. Well, we begin then with a portrait of the servant of God. And as we do consider this self-portrait of Paul, my purpose is that it would serve as an opportunity for self-examination for all of us. We too, if we are trusting in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we too are servants of God. Well, what kind of servants are we? How do we match up to the portrait that we find here presented? Now, clearly, we are not, nor are we intended to be, clones of Paul. We are not to be exactly as he was. The ministry that we have been given is not exactly the same as his. But we are, and we have a warrant to see Paul as an example for us. He himself encourages us in that way, be imitators of me as I imitate Christ. Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ, as he encouraged the believers in Corinth to do. So he does to us, and this portrait can help us in that regard. There are here principles of servanthood that apply to all of us as believers, as disciples of Jesus. Can I also say, as we introduce what we're saying, that my primary concern is not really, or intent in any case, is not to provoke some kind of guilt trip as you discover

how far short you fall. I don't think I would be offending anybody if I said that we would all, in some measure, as we consider Paul and this portrait of Paul, we would conclude, well, I fall so far short. As I say, I don't think anybody would take offense at that suggestion. And it's not my primary concern that that that would be the outcome of this, though it may be, but rather that the outcome of this considering of this portrait would be to enthuse you and to excite you to get fully on board in the adventure that is serving God as He would have us serve Him. There are three aspects of Paul's servanthood that he refers to and describes in this address, three in any case that I want to highlight and consider. And we can mention what the three are in one sentence, and the sentence, as you hear it said, you'll be able to see the three parts that we'll be thinking about. The servant of God is one who is called by Jesus, called by Jesus, that he might make Jesus known. Let me just repeat that, that it would remain, I hope, engraved in your mind as a reference point as we continue. The servant of God is one who is called by Jesus to the service of Jesus, that he or she might make Jesus known. First of all then, the servant of God is one called by Jesus. Paul makes reference to this in the words that he addresses to the Ephesians, very particularly as he considers future service, as he considers what lays ahead of him as he heads to Jerusalem. Indeed, the dangers that he expects will be awaiting him there. Notice how he looks forward grounded in a backward glance to his own call by Jesus to ministry. Then in verse 24, however, I consider my life worth nothing to me. If only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

I'm sure that as Paul spoke these words in his own mind, he was remembering that encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, remembering the words that the Lord delivered to him by mouth of Ananias, commissioning him to carry the name of Jesus to the Gentiles very particularly. The king of kings had called Paul, and the only reasonable response that he could offer was, here I am, send me, do with me as you please, grant me the task that you would have me do, and I will do it.

[9 : 14] The servant of God called by the risen Jesus. And as we notice the words that he uses, let's just briefly notice some aspects of this call. First of all, we can say that it is Jesus himself who calls Paul to his service, and indeed calls all of us to his service. The call was a personal call. He called Paul by name. How special is that, that the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the risen and ascended and triumphant and reigning Jesus would call us, and call us by name, that we might serve him. The Lord of glory fixes his eyes upon us. He determines to use us in the fulfilling of his purposes, and he calls us by name. Now, maybe the manner in which he does so for us, maybe the manner in which he did so for you, was not as visibly dramatic as it was with Paul, very particularly as we think of his journey to

Damascus. And yet, the actual commissioning of Paul, the actual commissioning where Paul was told what he would do was not by means of a face-to-face encounter with the risen Jesus, but through a servant of God, a fellow servant, Ananias. He was the one who had the task of saying to Paul, this is the task that God would have you do. And so, perhaps it's not so different for us. Through the Word of God, as it is taught, as it is preached, as it is explained to us, perhaps in a conversation, Jesus calls us to his service. And this call involves a task to be performed and a race to be run. Paul speaks of that in these words, I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me. And what is this task that was given to Paul, and we can confidently say is also given to all who are called by Jesus? Well, the task was to testify to the gospel of God's grace. These are the very words that Paul uses. The task assigned to all God's servants, and that includes you if you are a servant of God. The question we need to ask nowadays, what is the task? This is the task, to testify to the gospel of God's grace. But the question that I have to ask and you have to ask in your own particular circumstances is, where am I to do this?

How am I to do this? To whom am I to testify? These are the kind of practical questions we all need to ask as we would endeavor to perform the task given. Perhaps you're unclear as to what your task is.

Perhaps you need to spend some time thinking about the task that God has given you to perform. Perhaps you, like so many, and we are all prone to this, can get so involved in the responsibilities of our lives, the work that we do, all necessary and legitimate, that we can forget to consider what it is that God has called us to do. What is the task that we should be performing?

Can I suggest that one or two of these questions might help you to consider and to ponder on this matter, even this morning? And I would hope that you would take this concern with you and continue giving thought to it. Your task is to testify to the gospel of God's grace. What is that? [13:14] What is the gospel of God's grace? How would you describe that? How would you explain that? What does that mean to you? How can you testify to this gospel? How can you witness to others concerning this gospel?

How can you testify to? Who can you testify to? And you need to think of real people with names and circumstances, people you know, people that surround you, people that you have the opportunity of meeting with and dealing with and speaking to. Who are the people that you will testify to concerning the gospel of God's grace? And I would urge you that these aren't just rhetorical questions for us to launch out and then move on, but take these with you and give an answer to them. Perhaps another question that might help you as you consider this, are there opportunities in the life of this congregation that you form a part of that would allow you to testify to the gospel? There are many in the congregation who this week will be doing so as they meet with and are involved in the holiday club. That is one opportunity, and it is good that there are those who have grasped the opportunity to, in this way, testify to the gospel of God's grace. But many of us, most of us, are not involved. In what other ways in the life of the congregation could we be engaged in this task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace? This call, it is a personal call. It involves a task to be performed, a race to be run. And this race to be run also leads us into another aspect of this call, that it is all-consuming. It is to be central to who we are and what we are. The language that Paul uses is, as we've noticed, very intense.

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task. Paul is saying, nothing else matters. Maybe when we think of this language of the race, it brings to mind a very familiar picture, certainly. But as we approach the London Olympics, there's so much focus on that, and interviews with athletes and with swimmers as they prepare for it. Just here, close by in Mveruri, we have a local hero, Miley Cyrus, who got the silver medal at the World Championships swimming just last week. And of course, she's been interviewed, and the focus is the Olympics. And as she answers the questions that are posed to her, it's so evident how, and this is the language that she uses and others use, the only thing that matters is preparing for the Olympics. Nothing else matters. That is my sole and exclusive focus. That's all that matters for me. You see, there is this focus because that is where she is heading. That is what is important. And Paul says, the only thing that matters to me is testifying to the gospel of God's grace. Nothing else matters in comparison. If only, if only I do this, then I will have done what I was called to do. The call is an all-consuming one.

There is a focus and a sense of purpose in Paul that is required if we are to be the servants that God would have us be. Serving God is not a hobby. It's not a fringe activity for the Christian.

[16:52] It must be at the center of who we are and how we live. How do you answer the question? Maybe in just casual social encounters, the question is posed, what do you do? Often the one that begins a conversation, what do you do? Do you think it would be weird to respond, I am a servant of God.

I am a disciple of Jesus. That is who I am. That is what I do. Does the very thought of answering the question, what do you do? What do you do in that way? Fill you with a sense of, oh, I could never say that. But is that not who you are? Is that not the most important thing? Yes, you're a doctor, you're a lawyer, you're a policeman, and all of these things are important and valid and legitimate. But can you say with Paul, the main thing, my main identity is that I am a servant of God.

So, the servant of God is one who has been called by Jesus. But as we suggested in the sentence with which we began, called by Jesus to the service of Jesus. And in verses 18 and 19, we have Paul describing his service to Jesus amongst the Ephesians. Notice how he describes it.

And when they arrived, he said to them, the elders have arrived, and now he addresses them, you know how I lived the whole time I was with you from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord. I served Jesus with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. Now, that Paul was called to the service of Jesus, I think, is very clear already. It's been established by the call that we've noted. And as we think of this next aspect of call to the service of Jesus, our interest is not so much what He did, but the manner in which He did it, which is what He addresses in these verses, the manner in which He served Jesus.

And Paul very explicitly speaks of how he served the Lord in a particular way. And he identifies three features of His service in these verses. Indeed, as we go, or if we were to go through the whole passage, we could find other aspects of it. But we limit ourselves to the three aspects of His service, the manner of His service that He Himself identifies in this verse. I served the Lord, there in verse 19, first of all, with great humility, with great humility. What can we say of that? Well, we can say this, that this humility that Paul speaks of is a humility that is both grounded and manifested. What do we mean by that? Well, it's grounded in the task that He has been given. You see, the task He has been given is to testify to the gospel of God's grace. So, at the very heart of His task is the proclamation of a gospel that will constantly remind Paul, even as he declares it, that He is who He is by the free and unmerited mercy of God, by the grace of God. So, even as he proclaims it, he's reminding himself, I am doing what I am doing. I am what I am for one reason and one reason alone, the grace of

[20 : 20] God. So, how could he not be humble as he is grounded in this conviction, as he is able to grasp in ever greater depth and with an ever greater appreciation, that all that He is and all that He does is by grace. This is the gospel that he proclaims. And so, for us, the greater our appreciation of the gospel, so the greater will be our humility in the service of the gospel. The fuller our vision of Jesus, the more we will be driven to our knees in the service of Jesus. And so, we say, why was Paul humble? He himself describes himself as somebody who worked with great humility. Why was that true? Was this a caricature trait? Well, when we think of Paul in his unconverted days, far from being a humble man, he was a proud man. He recognizes that. This is not a caricature trait. No, he served with great humility because he understood the great gospel, and that must also be so of us. But this humility is not only grounded in his appreciation of the gospel, it's also manifested. It could be seen, it was experienced by the Ephesians. He served others humbly, the manner that he dealt with others, his sensitivity to the difficulties some folks might have with the message he was bringing, his patience in delivering the message, his tolerance in the face of opposition and constant criticism, his concern for the well-being of others before his own as he touches on towards the end of his address. And we could go on. But as we think of ourselves, as we think of this as a portrait that would inform us and direct us, we too must serve the Lord with great humility. Is that true of you?

Or is it true of you that you're easily offended when somebody says something that just doesn't quite fit as you think it should? Are you somebody who insists on your own point of view? Are you somebody who finds it difficult to work with others in the service of God because it's just so difficult because you can't get your own way? Are you reluctant to submit to the authority or the leadership of another? Are you always looking for what is most convenient or comfortable for you? And so you say, yes, well, I could help in this way, but that's not really very convenient for me. So Paul would come to you. Well, this portrait of Paul comes to challenge you that your service of God is to be in this fashion with great humility. But Paul goes on and he describes another aspect of the manner of his service with great humility. And then he goes on to say, and with tears, with tears. Now, what are we to make of these tears? You can read these verses and pass by them quite quickly and say, well, it's somebody describing what happened to Paul. But why did Paul cry amongst them? There in verse 19, there's no explanation as to why. But in verse 31, there is another reference to tears that is in a context that maybe helps us to answer the question, well, why did he cry? Notice what it says in verse 31.

Again, this is Paul speaking, be on your guard. Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. You see, these tears were in the context of his warning them to stand firm and not be drawn away from the faith. So, these tears, I think we can reasonably conclude, were evidence of his love for the Lord himself, the Lord of the gospel, but also as a result, his love for the Lord's people. And it caused Paul distress to the point of tears that there were enemies of the gospel and of the Lord of the gospel who would draw his people away, who would twist the truth.

It caused him tears to imagine that these believers that he loved so dearly might be deceived and led astray with all the consequent pain and suffering that would ensue. And so, he served the Lord in Ephesus with tears. And I think it is legitimate to ask the question, how many tears are there in our service of God? I don't know if, even as I pose the question, some of you, I know if I were where you were, I would probably be like this. Whether you're immediately on the defensive and saying, oh, well, that's just, some people are like that. Some people cry so easily, that's not me. And of

course, it's true, we are different. I can think of somebody who found it difficult to get through a whole episode of Little House on the Prairie without shedding a tear. I won't confess who that person was, but he's not a million miles away from you right now. Some people are more prone to that, and some people are different.

And of course, we're not to be clones one of another, but I still think the question is a legitimate one. How many tears are there in our service of God? Paul is not prescribing tears as a necessary feature of faithful service. You know, our love for the Lord is not in direct proportion to how many tears we shed. Clearly, that is true. And yet, might it not be the case that the absence of tears can be, and often is, a reflection or evidence of an absence of love. Paul served with great humility.

[26 : 00] He served with tears, and he served in the third place, as he himself describes it, with testing, with trials. I serve the Lord with great humility and with tears and with testing, with trials.

And faithful service brings opposition. It brings testing. The nature of the testing will differ depending on circumstances and location, the nature of gospel work that we are involved in, but testing there will be. And while time doesn't allow us to develop this any further, it is or should be a matter of concern to us if we are able to coast along in our Christian service.

Coasting along. No real testing, no real trials, no real difficulty to speak of. Coasting along. If that is where you are, you should perhaps ask if something is awry.

Before moving on to notice the final part of what we want to notice of this portrait of a servant of God, just notice that this service that Paul is describing with great humility, with tears, with testing, is unremitting and persevering. The language he uses the whole time, from the first day that I arrived amongst you. Then he goes on later on to say, for three years, night and day, there were no breaks. There were no holidays. There were no sabbaticals for Paul in his service of the Lord. But let's move on to the final thing we want to comment on this morning. Paul called by Jesus to the service of Jesus that he might make Jesus known.

This, of course, was the task that he had been given to testify to the gospel of God's grace. It is the task that all of us as disciples of Jesus are given. And, of course, we've touched on in a perhaps rather superficial way some aspects of that task. But I want us to develop this part of the portrait that the servant of God is to make Jesus known by noticing two ways in which Paul made Jesus known.

[28 : 19] He made Jesus known, perhaps quite obviously, by the message that he verbally proclaimed concerning Jesus. This is what he was about. He was about proclaiming with words the truth concerning Jesus.

He made Jesus known in his teaching, in his preaching, in his dialoguing, in his debating with those whom he met. But also, and Paul makes it very clear that this is so, he made Jesus known by the example of his life. What of the message he proclaimed? Well, he was to testify to the gospel of God's grace, and Paul himself provides us with his essential summary of what that gospel was about.

There in verse 20, you know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but have taught you publicly and from house to house. And then he gives, if you wish, a summary of what it was that he declared of the message. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. This was the message that he proclaimed.

This was the gospel that he testified to, not some philosophical discourse, but an appeal to sinners, a call to sinners, a call to repentance, a call to sinners that they would put their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The gospel is the good news concerning the manner in which sinners can be saved. It is about the way that God has opened up that we might be forgiven and so enjoy restored friendship with God. And what does it involve? What is this way? Well, it's a turning from sin, repenting of our sin, recognizing our condition and our sinfulness, and as we turn from sin, so we turn to God by faith in His Son to God by faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith, these two elements, two sides really of the same coin. You can't have one without the other.

The message that Paul proclaimed is all about Jesus, who He is, what He has done, and what He offers sinners even today. And this message was proclaimed verbally, was made known verbally by Paul, to all without fear or favor. Hence, He is able to declare very boldly there in verse 26, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. I have not hesitated to proclaim this message, to make this appeal to all men. How they have responded, that is not my responsibility, but I have made the appeal. I have declared this truth. I have made Jesus known. And God has

seen fit to make use of that message as He has intended. Is that true of us? Do we make Jesus known verbally?

[31 : 25] Do we speak about Jesus? Do we tell people the good news concerning Jesus? But I said also that He made Jesus known not only by the message He proclaimed, but also by the example of His life. And we could develop this in different ways, but I'm going to limit myself to one example that we have in this passage, one that we've already touched on as we shared a few words with the children.

Towards the end of His address to the elders, He makes reference to this saying of Jesus that curiously we don't find in any of the Gospels. And yet clearly it's something that Jesus did say and has been preserved for us in this fashion. This saying, it is more blessed to give than to receive. But the point that I want you to think about here in the context of how Paul made Jesus known by His life, by His example, is really the question that I pose to the children. How did, how did Paul teach this truth? This truth that Jesus had first enunciated, how did He teach it?

Not in some formal lesson. He taught it by His life. See, this is exactly what he says in verse 35, in everything I did, I showed you. I showed you. But by this kind of hard work, we must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus Himself. It is more blessed to give than to receive. He didn't gather them around and say, listen, you Christians. I know this is a tough one to understand, but Jesus said it's more blessed to give than to receive. So I hope you're doing a lot more giving than receiving.

Because it's, Jesus said it, it must be true. No, He showed them. He demonstrated it. Perhaps this is the first time He ever mentioned the words of Jesus. We don't know. But He'd already taught the lesson in the three years that He had been there. He had showed them by His life. In that way, He declared Jesus. He made Jesus known. And so, again, clearly, the portrait that we are being presented with serves as instruction for us and indeed challenge for us. Is that true of us? Do we declare Jesus? Do we make Jesus known by the lives that we live? So then, the servant of God called by Jesus to the service of Jesus, that he, that she, that you, that I might make Jesus known? Have you responded to the call of Jesus on your life? Do you know the task that He has given you to do? Are you forgetting all else, focusing your attention on this task that you have been given? How are you serving your Lord? Are you serving Him with great humility, with tears, and with testing? Are you making Jesus known by word and by example? Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we...