

RUNNING HARD TO THE FINISH LINE ACTS 20:22-24

Mindy and I are at an age and stage of life in which we find ourselves doing a fair amount of *reflecting*—reflecting upon the lifelong journey we have been on together as disciples of Jesus, and, specifically, reflecting upon how we hope to finish that journey. We want to finish well, we want to finish strong, and, in the words of Paul, “we make it our aim to please the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:9), for when we see Him, we want nothing more than to hear those words, “Well done, my good and faithful servants.”

Of course, we do not know the future, and something could happen that might abruptly alter our present hopes and dreams. Nevertheless, as we contemplate our future in service to our Lord Jesus, some things have happened in recent months that have provided some clarity.

Before I share those things with you, let me go back a few years and provide some context. When God led us to EBC twenty-five years ago, I made a vow to the Lord that I would be faithful in my assignment to shepherd this flock until He clearly told us to do something else. After being here a few years, in January of 2005, as I was earnestly praying and seeking the Lord about my ministry, God clearly spoke to me: “You have been faithful in a few things; I will now entrust you with more things.” One month later I was invited by Mike Silva to minister to pastors in Bolivia for a week. I continued to minister to pastors in Latin America a couple of times a year until 2010, when we had the opportunity to return to Kenya where we had lived prior to coming to EBC.

The ministry of ELLS International was born in 2011 with the help and guidance of twin brothers, Drs. George and Moses Muguro, who are prominent pastors in Kenya. We wanted to serve and strengthen the church in remote areas of the developing world by equipping its shepherds to effectively feed the flock of God. Most of these pastors/shepherds have had no formal training, nor do they have resources that might help them accurately interpret the Bible so they can preach and teach it with authority.

Since 2011, we have completed our training course in hermeneutics and homiletics for more than a thousand pastors in seven regions throughout Kenya and Uganda. Though we certainly do not know *all* that God has done through this training, we *have* been privileged to see some of the fruit, and what we have heard and witnessed is both encouraging and astounding.

In 2013, Mindy and I wrestled with the question of simplifying our lives so that we could give ourselves more fully to our work for the Lord. We prayed about whether he would have us sell our home and significantly downsize. Then, in August of 2013, my mother had a hemorrhagic stroke and was disabled, and we fulfilled an earlier promise to use our large home to provide a space for my mom and dad to live, and to care for them for the remainder of their lives. When my mother died in June of 2020, and my dad died exactly one year ago this week, we were once again in a position to reevaluate our lives and ministry.

Fast forward to January of this year. Just before Grant Clay and I were to go to Kenya for two weeks of meetings, he got Covid and was unable to make the trip. As I joined our six East African team members in Nairobi, and then travelled to four regions visiting bishops and ELLS students, it quickly became apparent that God was leading ELLS Int'l to move forward in significant ways. In conversations and consultations with our East Africa Advisory Council, the vision for how God wanted ELLS International to expand, and the steps that needed to be taken for this ministry to become more effective, became very clear, especially to me.

One of the things we realized is that ELLS International would need a far greater presence and much stronger leadership in Africa itself. When Grant felt that he was not in a place nor did he have the capacity to provide that kind of leadership, and that God was leading him to pursue other vocational paths, I sensed the Lord stirring my heart to consider this leadership role myself.

I should tell you that I am extremely content and happy in my present role at Emmanuel Bible Church. Though, at 62, my body is slowing down, my mind has never been more fertile. I love pastoral ministry (well...most of it). I love working with our staff and elders. I have never enjoyed sermon preparation as much as I have in the last few years, and I have never loved this congregation as deeply as I do now. So, this decision is not the result of discontentment or a reaction to any problem or conflict.

It is, I believe, a simple and straightforward call from the Lord. It is, I believe, a call to a task that he has uniquely gifted and equipped me to fulfill. Somehow, I am proficient at cross-cultural ministry. Somehow, I do not mind long-distance travel and do not have any fear when I venture into strange and unfamiliar places. Somehow, God has given me favor with prominent church leaders in all the regions and countries we have been. Somehow, He gives me supernatural energy to work tirelessly when I am there (I don't even get jetlag). Somehow, I don't get sick when I eat the food prepared in extremely unsanitary conditions or drink the tea made from contaminated water (and that has to be a God thing).

Most important, somehow, God has given me a deep love for pastors in remote places who feel acutely inadequate, ill-equipped, and who have been deprived of the resources they need to shepherd their flocks well. I know Jesus loves them and cares about them deeply, and I believe He has given me *His* love for them.

These are reasons I feel compelled to take on a greater capacity of leadership with ELLS International. I believe God has told me that I *must* do this! Not to do this would be disobedience.

For the next few minutes, I want to look at one of my favorite passages of Scripture, which contains a verse that has, for many years, been my life verse. It is a passage that is part of a farewell address given by the Apostle Paul to some people who were very dear to him and that he would never see again. He was on his way to Jerusalem, and during a stopover in Miletus he called for the elders of the church at Ephesus.

Acts 20:18-24. ¹⁸ *When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ¹⁹ I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. 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. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*

²² *And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there."*

Let me make a couple of comments about verse 22. Notice, Paul said he was "*compelled by the Spirit*" to go to Jerusalem. This, I believe, was the single most important factor in Paul's ministry, and it is the single most important factor in our ministry as well. The word, "compelled," means "to cause someone to do a particular thing or to act in a particular way." So, it could also be translated, "to force" or "to coerce." So, when the Holy Spirit communicated His will to Paul about going to Jerusalem, He did not *suggest* that Paul go. He *told* Him to go; these were Paul's marching orders from the Holy Spirit. As such, Paul

could not respond by saying, “Oh, okay. I’ll think about it,” or “I’ll pray about it.” No. When he heard the Spirit communicate His intentions, he said, “Yes, Lord.”

But notice what else is in **verse 22**. *“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.”*

By the way, this was true for Paul in every city he visited, not just Jerusalem. When he went somewhere he had no idea what kind of reception he would get, who he would meet, where he would stay, how he would live, or how he would make ends meet.

That’s a hard concept, especially for Americans. We don’t like the unknown. We like to have things figured out. We like predictability. We want to know where we are going and what it is going to happen to us when we get there. We want to have an itinerary, a cost analysis, a back-up plan, and an exit strategy.

You know why that is, don’t you? It’s because we like to be in control of our lives so that we can ensure that whatever happens to us meets with our approval and works out for our benefit. Of course, we convince ourselves that trying to figure everything out in advance is synonymous with good stewardship or wise planning or due diligence. After all, we reason, if we don’t, we might end up in a situation that is really unpleasant or unbearable.

We have good reasons, we think, to take matters into our own hands. But that this is not how Jesus calls us to live. He calls us to live by faith. We learned in Matthew’s Gospel that disciples of Jesus are not in charge of their own lives. They have put to death self-interest and self-assertion and are committed to following Jesus wherever He leads and doing whatever He says for as long as He wants; whether it’s comfortable or not, convenient or not, safe or not. And that often means venturing into the unknown - proceeding into territory where we do not have things figured out and we do not know what is going to happen.

When Paul went somewhere, almost anywhere, he just showed up...and trusted God to open doors of opportunity, to introduce him to the people He wanted him to meet, to lead him to the places He wanted him to go, to orchestrate circumstances and events to accomplish His purposes, and to make provision for all his needs. This is called living by faith. *Faith is willingly following the Spirit’s lead, even when you do not know the outcome.*

I should tell you that in answering God’s call to work with ELLS International, Mindy and I are choosing to live by faith. We’re going to have to trust God to supply the resources, financial and otherwise, to build and grow this ministry in the way that we believe He is leading us to build and grow it. But God has proven Himself to be faithful throughout our entire journey together, and we know He will continue to be faithful. ELLS International has adopted Hudson Taylor’s famous quote, “God’s work, done God’s way, will never lack God’s supply.”

Once again, *faith is willingly following the Spirit’s lead, even when you do not know the outcome.* Even when you don’t have the resources and you don’t know where those resources are going to come from. Even when you know that there are going to be hardships and challenges. I have no doubt that answering this call from God will land us Mindy and me circumstances that are unpleasant and uncomfortable. I have no doubt that the task will be more difficult and more stressful than the job I am currently doing. I have no doubt that we will be stretched in ways that we cannot even imagine right now. But I doubt if it will be nearly as difficult or uncomfortable as what Paul had to endure.

Look at **verses 22-23**: *“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.”*²³ ***“I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.”***

How would *you* feel if *all* you knew is that prison and hardships were facing you? How inspired, how motivated would you be to keep going? I mean, I can see getting thrown in prison maybe once; I can see having a bad experience in one or maybe two of the cities Paul had been called to go to. But *every* city? How in the world could Paul keep going?

He tells us in **verse 24**. 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.* This verse is a summary of Paul’s personal philosophy of ministry, and I have adopted it as my own, because I believe this is a summary of discipleship as Jesus defined it.

Paul begins, *“I consider my life worth nothing to me...”* Paul was *not* confessing, here, to having a poor self-esteem, nor was he saying that he had a death wish. He was simply reminding his friends that his life was not his own—he belonged to the Lord Jesus and his life was in His hands. He was reminding them that the reason for his existence on this earth was not to be comfortable; it was not to be happy; it was not to promote his own interests or satisfy his personal desires. His purpose was solely to serve his Master, Jesus—to obey Him and to fulfill the assignment He had given him. Nothing else mattered. And if bad things happened to him along the way, so be it. His life was in God’s hands, and for him to live was Christ, and to die was gain (Phil. 1:21).

Paul continues in **verse 24**. 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.*

One might be tempted to read this statement and conclude that this has more to do with Paul’s personality than anything else. Someone might say he was driven; he was a *Type A*; he was obsessive-compulsive.

But I would submit to you that Paul’s focus, dedication, and sense of urgency was *not* a personality type, but the result of having his spiritual eyes opened to see eternal realities. It started on the road to Damascus Paul where the Lord Jesus revealed Himself to him in a blinding, brilliant light. Shortly after, he was filled with the Holy Spirit, who gave him the “mind of Christ,” the ability to see things from Christ’s perspective. That completely altered his view of reality, it completely rearranged his priorities and passions, it completely changed the course of his life.

As a result, he was *preoccupied* with his marching orders from Jesus and was determined to let nothing distract him from fulfilling his assignment. And Paul’s specific assignment from the Lord was to preach the gospel in places where it had never been preached (Romans 15:20-21).

So, as we continue to read the Book of Acts, we discover that Paul was, indeed, imprisoned in Jerusalem, but as a result had opportunities to preach the Gospel to kings and government officials while he was incarcerated. Afterward, he was sent to Rome, a city he had always dreamed of going, and even on his way there, had numerous opportunities to preach the gospel and see people won to the Lord.

What Paul said to the Ephesian elders about running hard all the way to the end, finishing strong, and finishing well, actually happened. Does it not stand to reason that this ought to be the ambition of every servant of Christ? Does it not stand to reason that all those Jesus calls and assigns to a particular task will have the same kind of focus, dedication, and sense of urgency in completing that task as Paul did? We have the same Holy Spirit. We have the same message. We face the same need.

I have a different assignment from the Lord than Paul did. I have been called to be a pastor, and the primary work of a pastor, according to Ephesians 4, is to prepare and equip people in the church to do the work of the ministry. In 1985, the year our son James was born, I became the pastor of Foothills Bible Church in Placerville, California. When I resigned six years later, a church that was averaging 250 people dwindled to thirty-five in just three weeks.

That was my fault. I had not spent any time or effort preparing and equipping people to do the work of the ministry. I was too busy trying to do it all by myself. As a result, I left a floundering flock, and the church eventually died.

When I came to Emmanuel Bible Church in 1997, one of my top priorities was to train and equip this church to do the work of the ministry. So, Dan Tuggy and I began our ELLS program in 1998 (ELLS stands for *Equipping Leaders for a Lifetime of Service*), and since then we have trained and equipped more than 200 in this church to use their gifts and to actively participate in the Lord's service. I don't know this for sure, but I suspect that may be the most eternally consequential work that I have done here.

My assignment is to train and equip people to do the work of the ministry. And in the last several years God has expanded that focus to train and equip *pastors* to do the work of the ministry. Specifically, pastors who do not have access to substantive training, and pastors who are unable, for whatever reasons, to go to a place, like a seminary, where they can receive that training—pastors who have no hope of being trained and equipped unless we go to them.

And let me do some math with you: The average church in rural sub-Saharan Africa has 50 people (for some reason they don't count children, so add another 20-25). For two weeks in May, we will begin training and equipping 800 pastors and 200 Sunday School teachers to accurately interpret and effectively teach and preach the Word of God with their limited resources. Do you know how many people will benefit? Forty thousand. Do you know how many children will benefit? 16-20 thousand.

And I'm guessing that some of those kids will be so impacted by the Word of God that they will grow up and say with Paul, "I, too, am compelled to preach the gospel in places where it has never been heard." They are the ones who may be fulfilling the Great Commission that we heard about last week.

By the way, you may have done some math on your own. You may be wondering how I can devote myself to this task by working at it half-time, especially since Dr. Grant was our full time Executive Director. It just so happens that while God has been stirring my heart about making this vocational transition, He has been stirring the heart of Dr. George Muguro, who helped start ELLS in 2011, and who has been on the ELLS Int'l Board for many years. George is a pastor of a local church, a bishop (which means that he oversees pastors of several other local churches), and the principle of Manna Bible Institute, an accredited Bible college in Nairobi, Kenya.

God is calling George to devote himself to ELLS International in the same way he is calling me. He has the same love for pastors, and the same burden to see them equipped. And so, George and I will be working together, though he will be living in Africa. He will be the African Director of ELLS International, while I will be the Executive Director living here in Oregon.

Not only do I admire and respect George, I consider him one of my dearest friends, and there are few people I would rather spend time with. George and his wife, Irene, will be traveling with Bishop Noah Pogoto and Mindy and I to Malawi in ten days. Meanwhile,

George's brother, Moses, and Debbie Sardo's pastor, Charles Juma, will be commencing our first two cohorts in Kenya, consisting of 25 students who are making a two year commitment to be trained to teach the ELLS materials to pastors all over Africa.

God put this team together, for the sake of His church, His shepherds, and His kingdom. To Him be all the glory, Amen.

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MAIN IDEA: ONE'S PERSONAL ASSIGNMENT FROM THE LORD DEMANDS ONE'S UNDIVIDED ATTENTION AND UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO THE VERY END.

PAUL'S ASSIGNMENT (22-24)

COMPELLED BY THE SPIRIT (22A)

THE UNKNOWN (22)

THE KNOWN (23)

PRISON

HARDSHIPS

A PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE (24)

AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE

STAYING FOCUSED

FINISHING THE RACE

COMPLETING THE TASK

PAUL'S TASK

YOUR TASK