

## UNIT 35

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**THAT I MAY**

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**GAIN CHRIST**

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# “The Value of Knowing Christ”

by Daniel Ritchie

One question has hung in the back of my mind for the first two decades of my life.

“Why?”

Especially in my teens, I probably asked God that question a thousand times at least. I was born without either one of my arms and have spent my life adapting to a world designed for people with two. I experienced lots of external struggle as I learned to accomplish daily tasks using my feet while also facing push-back and criticism from the outside world that simply could not understand my situation.

Before I was in a relationship with Christ, the question I asked God was, “Why don’t You love me?” I felt like the circumstances of my life filled with hardship was the picture of God’s lack of love for me. When I understood the gospel, the picture of God’s love for me could not have been clearer.

As Romans 5:8 says that God shows His love for us in that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

## SHEPHERDED THROUGH PAIN

Once that “why” had been answered, a new question emerged: “Why do I have to suffer so much?” That question took a significantly longer time to answer. Yet, I am so grateful for a number of men who invested in me and disciplined me through the years and were willing to shepherd me through my pain.

It was wild to watch how each of those men kept pointing me to the life of the apostle Paul. I began reading through the book of Acts and all that Paul encountered in both his story of salvation and the timeline of his ministry. I read through Romans, which God had already used in a significant way in my life to show His love for me. Then I slowly read through the litany of Paul’s letters, especially the ones that he wrote from prison.

## PAUL'S PAIN AND GOD'S POWER

There was a lot to learn from the life of Paul. I think the one clear thing that jumps off the pages of Scripture is the love that Paul had for both Jesus and His church. Yet, behind the backdrop of Paul's love of Jesus is the fact that he had done so in the face of so much pain and affliction.

Paul told the Corinthian church of the incredible list of afflictions he endured for the name of Christ: beatings, stonings, shipwreck, all sorts of dangers, and the anxiety of leading churches. On top of all of that, Paul dealt with something that he called his thorn in the flesh (see 2 Corinthians 12:7). We have no idea what exactly that Paul was dealing with, but we know it tormented him so much that he pleaded with the Lord on three separate occasions to make the thorn go away (v. 8).

The Lord's reply to Paul answered my "why" when it came to my own suffering. God's message to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9 was, "My grace is sufficient for you." Along with that, God's power is perfected

in our weakness. In the times when Paul was at his most vulnerable were the times that Paul reflected the power of God the most in his life.

We can keep going  
because we know  
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of our lives.

The power of God to redeem the dark parts of our lives doesn't end with simply removing our sin. The promise of Romans 8:28 is that "all things work together" for good. There is no asterisk when it comes to what exactly is covered by "all things." Good things, difficult things, scary things, sad things—all can be used by God for His purpose.

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### THE GOSPEL AND SUFFERING

Even the gospel itself is intertwined with suffering and hardship. Man sinned, so toil and death came on the scene in Genesis 3. Jesus took on flesh to be a perfect sacrifice for the sin of man. That sacrifice on a brutal Roman cross was what gives man hope of restoration to a holy God. To be clothed in the righteousness of Christ, the only sinless person in the history of earth had to die the punishment we deserve.

The grace of Jesus going to the cross was not only the means of our salvation, but it also gave us a path to follow. Philippians 2 calls us to have the same mind Jesus had when He humbled Himself to the point of death on a cross for a bunch of rebels like you and me. Because of that sacrifice, Christ is exalted, giving Jesus the name above every name, that every knee would bow and every tongue confess to Him, for the glory of God (vv. 9-11).

In the exaltation of Christ, we can have the endurance of Christ. Paul said later in Philippians 3:8 that he considered everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

We can keep going because Jesus is not going to leave us. We can keep going because we know He is redeeming the hardest parts of our lives. We can keep going because we know that He is worth it. We can keep going because we know we will see Him face to face—at the Father's side—in eternity.



# ENDURING WITH GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

Paul followed the Holy Spirit's guidance to return to Jerusalem and trusted in the Lord no matter the danger he faced.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Acts 20–22

**+** **SETTING:**

Paul performed mighty miracles and revealed God's power to the believers in Ephesus (Acts 19:11-20), but that led to unwanted attention and a riot. Paul encouraged the Ephesians and then made a three-month sweep through the churches in Macedonia, encouraging them as well (20:1-6). After sailing through the Mediterranean, hopping between islands, Paul chose to sail past Ephesus because he was hoping to return to Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost (20:16).

# DAY 1

## READ:

**Acts 20:17-21**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Acts 20:18-21**

## NOTES



### **KEY DOCTRINE #64: WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN**

The Spirit's work in the life of a Christian begins in the work of salvation in bringing a person to faith in Christ and is continued through the work of sanctification in helping the Christian to become progressively more like Christ throughout the course of his or her life. He also empowers and indwells believers, intercedes on their behalf, and equips them with special gifts for the service of God's kingdom. He is the Comforter to the believer and aids us in properly interpreting the Bible.

I wish you could have met my husband's great-aunt Edith. She had been a tireless wife, mother, and sister. She'd worked as hard as anyone could on their family farm, but she'd also devoted herself to loving and serving others. Her gentle spirit and calm voice were genuine and beautiful, but she was also remembered for her toughness, joy, and holiness.

She'd been a member of her small church for something like 80 years, and at her funeral the pastor opened with the words, "Edith was the best of us." Those words hit me like a ton of bricks; not because he was being overly dramatic, but because he was right. Aunt Edith was beautiful inside and out, full of love and devotion to Jesus and others.

I know Paul didn't have a proper funeral, but I wonder what his brothers and sisters might have said. When you read the words in today's passage, you might think he's being a bit of a braggart; I think he was more like Aunt Edith. He'd surrendered every claim to himself and lived willingly submissive to the Lord in every way. He lived his life openly as an example to others (see 1 Corinthians 11:1).

**What do your own outward acts reveal about your inward devotion to loving God and others?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

Acts 20:22-24

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 20:22-23

## NOTES

Toddlers are known for asking why a million times. When a mother gently instructs, “Put on your shoes,” she is met with “Why?” The first time, the mother probably explains that it’s cold outside, and the pavement is rough, and stepped-on toes are really painful. After the 100<sup>th</sup> time, she may just say, “Because I said so.”

Asking why is not limited to toddlers. Christians of all ages and maturity levels seek the same answer from their heavenly Father. When a death rocks us to our core, we want to know why. When a sickness or disease takes away our normal life, we want to know why. When we see the rampant sin and brokenness of our world, we cry out to know why it’s not slowing.

We can only imagine Paul’s inward turmoil as he realized the trip to Jerusalem would result in chains and “afflictions” (v. 23). Put yourself in his shoes for just a second: you feel the blood rush from your face, that knot jumps into your stomach, and you feel your breathing get more and more shallow. And before faith can speak to your heart, you hear yourself ask God, “Why?” In the midst of the question, Paul chose to obey and follow the path. Why? Because grace (v. 24).

**In what situation are you asking God “why” today?  
What role has grace played in this situation?**

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

“God allows you to struggle, even though his power could prevent it, because his wise and compassionate authority knows that the benefit of your struggle far outweighs the comfort you may experience from his rescue.”<sup>1</sup>

—Jennifer Rothschild

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Acts 21:1-6**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Acts 21:4-5**

## NOTES

There is a holy sweetness in being with fellow believers in a time of exhaustion.

Look carefully at the account of the journey of Paul and his companions in these few short verses. These were men traveling on the Mediterranean Sea two thousand years ago; many of us wouldn't want to embark on these journeys even today. If you look at a map in the back of your Bible, you'll see that the routes were less than direct; they were at the whim of available boats and routes, just trying to make it to Jerusalem.

So picture Paul and friends: tired, a little numb, in need of a good meal and some smiling faces. They sought out the disciples and stayed there for a week (Acts 21:4). In the midst of the exhaustion of travel, they found people who loved God, loved them, and welcomed them into their home for a week. (Did I also mention Paul and his companions were probably in desperate need of a wash? That's brotherly love, right there!)

When we find ourselves tired, a little numb, and in need of a good meal and some smiling faces, perhaps we should take a page out of Paul's book: seek other believers. Let them bring you renewal and refreshment in the name of Jesus.

**Who in your life needs a little renewal and refreshment this week, and how can you meet that need?**



# DAY 4

## READ:

Acts 21:7-14

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 21:10-14

## NOTES

Every Christian needs an Agabus. Most people in your life are going to be on the tentative mindset, thinking, “I don’t want to hurt her feelings” or “He has enough on his plate as it is right now.” We can appreciate their care and concern, but we also need an Agabus: one who will give us a straight answer, regardless of our emotional state, in the name of Jesus.

My personal Agabus is a close friend named Nikki. I never doubt she will speak truth in love to me, and I never doubt she’ll temper it for the sake of my feelings. She is stalwart in the midst of my life, and I praise God for her. I may not like what she says initially, but I know she loves me in Jesus’s name.

Now don’t get me wrong. Agabus was not unkind or uncompassionate; his prophecy in Acts 11:28 had helped save countless people from devastation in a famine. But he was forthright, confident, and truthful. Everyone knew Paul was going to have trouble in Jerusalem, and everyone was trying to talk him out of it. Agabus confronted the situation head on, illustrating it with his own body and Paul’s belt. Agabus didn’t give his opinion or try to talk Paul out of the journey; he was simply stating God’s message.

**Who needs you to be an Agabus this week? Are you willing to speak truth in love?**

# DAY 5

## READ:

**Acts 22:1-21**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Acts 22:11-21**

## NOTES

I wear many hats in my day-to-day life: wife, mother, teacher, coach, pianist, sister, daughter, friend, confidante, chef, counselor, and more. Often, I find myself struggling to put two or three hats on my head at a time, figuratively speaking.

But this passage reminds me that, according to God, I have one hat to wear: witness. Ananias told Paul that the God of their ancestors had appointed Paul to be a witness of everything he had seen and heard (Acts 22:14-15). Paul heard his life plan in clarity: know God, see Jesus, hear His words, and go be a witness. In the course of his life, Paul also would wear many hats: tent-maker, traveler, debater, preacher, servant, encourager, letter-writer, shipwreck survivor, mentor, and more. Yet in it all, Paul was called to be a witness.

The same is true for me, and you, and anyone who would follow Jesus. He made it clear in Acts 1:8 when He explained we would receive power from the Holy Spirit and be His witnesses everywhere we go.

Stack those hats high, friends. Each is an opportunity to testify for Jesus.

**In what ways has God called you to His service to testify to His grace?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Sometimes I am asked to speak to young people who are toying with the idea of being missionaries. They want to know how I discovered the will of God. The first thing was to settle once and for all the supremacy of Christ in my life. . . . I put myself utterly and forever at His disposal, which means turning over all the rights to myself, my body, my self-image, my notions of how I am to serve my Master."<sup>2</sup>

—Elisabeth Elliot (1926–2015)

### **POINT 1: Following the Spirit requires holding an eternal perspective**

(Acts 20:22-24).

#### **KEY DOCTRINE #64: WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN**

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**How do you see the Holy Spirit active in the believer's life?**

Our value should be found in being God's children, with the purpose of testifying to Jesus.



**From Day 5: In what ways has God called you to His service to testify to His grace?**

### **POINT 2: Following the Spirit requires trusting the Lord's will** (Acts 21:10-14).

God's will through the Spirit's leading may lead us toward suffering, but we obey anyway.



**Where do you turn in the Bible when you come face to face with bad news?**

In all things, we follow God's will, trusting He is guiding us toward kingdom purposes and His glory.



How do we keep Paul’s outlook on God’s will, choosing to live obediently in the face of danger?

**POINT 3: Following the Spirit requires proclaiming Jesus boldly** (Acts 22:11-21).

Testimonies proclaiming Jesus are powerful and should be shared even when they are not well received.



How has God worked in your life where your testimony has shaped your current ministry opportunities?

Though Paul was still a Jew through and through, still upholding the Law, he was now a Christian called to bring the gospel to all people, Jews and Gentiles.



What part of your identity can seem to be prioritized above your identity as an ambassador of Jesus and why?

**MY RESPONSE**

Because Jesus endured opposition to bring about our salvation, we courageously testify to the gospel, even when the cost of telling the truth is high.

- **HEAD:** What should we do when we’re tempted to avoid the hard situations we face?
- **HEART:** What group of people do you have a hard time extending grace and forgiveness to, and how can you confess that to God?
- **HANDS:** How have you responded recently to the Spirit’s guidance in growing God’s kingdom?



Scan this QR code to access this session’s Scripture passages.

**VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY**

“Paul . . . shows us that we must have the courage to be vulnerable and speak personally about what the gospel means to us. Why? Because Christianity is an appeal to bring our whole life, mind and heart, to Christ. To leave out how we think, or how we feel, is to give an incomplete picture of how comprehensive Christian commitment is.”<sup>3</sup>

–Timothy Keller (1950–2023)