

"The Value Of Purpose"

Acts 21 – 26

Series: Book of Acts [#26]

August 24, 2008

Pastor Lyle L. Wahl

Theme: **Keeping God's Purpose In Focus Keeps You On Track.**

Introduction

We are almost finished with our journey through the book of Acts. Today we are taking an overview of chapters 21 – 26, and thinking about "*The Value Of Purpose.*" Purpose. Do you think about purpose for yourself?

- "Why am I here ... *really.*"
- "After all the activities and *stuff* of life, *Why?* Why am I doing all of this?"
- "What *is* the purpose of all of this, of my life?"

Sadly, many people don't think about, let alone choose and consciously follow a purpose for their lives. Do a quick survey of your last week. What was your overall purpose? Did you really follow it? Can it be seen in what you thought, said and did?

Some people don't think about purpose for their life until their world comes crashing down on them. Ernest Hemingway, the successful writer, Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winner, described some of the elite, powerful and wealthy during the stock market crash in 1929 this way, "Some made the long drop from the apartment or office window; some took it quietly in the two car garage with the motor running; some used the native tradition of the Colt or Smith & Wesson; those well-constructed weapons which end insomnia, terminate remorse, cure cancer, avoid bankruptcy, blast an exit from intolerable positions by the pressure of a finger."

Later, on July 2, 1961, facing illness and the dark clouds of depression, Hemingway used the same "pressure of a finger" on a double-barrelled shotgun to exit life where the dream had become a nightmare and did not, it seemed to him, have *purpose.*

Purpose. Purpose is important. It has great value. The Westminster Shorter Catechism states that "Man's chief end [purpose] is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." This grand statement is solidly rooted in Scripture, e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:31, "... whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." But how do we live by it? What does it mean to live it out today, every day, in every circumstance? Then, of course there is the important question, "Is this really my purpose."

Then there are specific purposes God has for us as we live out this overarching purpose. For example, as Acts 21 opens, Paul is firm in his purpose to go to Jerusalem to proclaim Christ in spite of the dangers, and prophecies that he would be bound and mistreated. He also had a long term purpose to reach his own people for Christ. As he wrote in Romans 10:1, "... my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation." We see "*The Value Of Purpose*" in Paul. His life teaches us that *Keeping God's Purpose In Focus Keeps You On Track.*

Following God's Purpose Neither Destroys Nor Is Destroyed By Fellowship.

Why is this value important? There are those who tell us that it is important to love and follow Jesus, to love and fellowship with His people, but things like doctrine, direction and discipline are not that important. After all, it is said, they can strain and fracture fellowship.

On the other hand, there are those who tell us that everyone must agree on all points of doctrine, direction and discipline in order to have fellowship.

Both views fail to properly understand purpose and its valuable role. Following true, godly purpose never destroys nor is destroyed by fellowship even in working through disagreements. Paul had a clear purpose at this point: to go to Jerusalem to proclaim Christ. 21:13b, "...I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

But everyone else with him saw it quite differently. They disagreed with Paul on this. The believers at Tyre "... kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to go to Jerusalem" (21:4). The Holy Spirit indicated to them what was ahead for Paul there, and they didn't want him to go through that. At Caesarea, after Agabus' dramatic acting out of the prophecy that Paul would be bound in Jerusalem (21:10-11), Luke writes in 21:12, "When we heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem."

The Holy Spirit indicated to Paul, to the believers at Tyre, to Agabus that imprisonment and suffering awaited him in Jerusalem. The difference, the disagreement, was that all these caring friends were saying, "Don't go! If you do, these terrible things will happen to you," while Paul was saying, "I must go in spite of all these terrible things."

Paul's steadfast purpose did not destroy their fellowship. Go to 21:13-15,

"Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, 'The will of the Lord be done!' After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem."

Paul felt their love and sorrow for him. All of them maintained, and perhaps deepened their fellowship throughout this disagreement on a specific purpose. We even see in verse 16 that some of them went with Paul and his group as they headed out to Jerusalem.

So it is today. Even when what lies ahead is clear, everyone is not going to interpret it in the same way, at least at the start. Godly purpose does not pit purpose and fellowship against each other. We too need to listen to, feel with each other and then deepen our fellowship in times like that. The horror stories of churches fracturing because of specific ministries, personalities, styles, and even the color of carpet, demonstrate a serious misunderstanding of both purpose and fellowship.

Following God's purpose neither destroys nor is destroyed by fellowship, even in working through disagreements, and even in working with weaker believers. At 21:17 Paul arrived in Jerusalem and began telling the believers about the great work of God among the Gentiles. Then Luke records, 21:20-26,

“And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.’ Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.”

While the Jerusalem church leaders rejoiced at Paul’s report, they were also concerned about the distortions of Paul’s teaching which many of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem had heard. Their solution was to have Paul demonstrate respect for the ceremonial law by identifying with four believers who were completing a Nazirite vow, and paying the expenses for their offerings. This, they said, would calm any fears about Paul among the Jewish believers.

Paul agreed. Earlier he had taken a Nazirite vow, as we saw in chapter 18. He did not compromise the gospel and its freedom from the ceremonial law, but showed sensitivity to those who, while knowing the law did not save them and was no longer binding, observed parts of it. Paul extended himself to weaker, fearful brothers in a way that may not have been his preference, but built fellowship.

A strong sense of Godly purpose creates flexibility, not rigidity in non-essentials. Truly living out Godly purpose leads to continued and growing fellowship, not to retreating into separate corners and firing away at each other.

Keeping God’s purpose in focus keeps you on track. Following God’s purpose neither destroys nor is destroyed by fellowship, even in working through disagreements, even in working with weaker believers.

Following God’s Purpose Enables A Clear Witness.

Being a witness of Christ is an essential part of our purpose. Jesus said, as Luke recorded back in 1:8, “...you shall be my witnesses ...” This specific part of our purpose will be clear as we faithfully live out our overall purpose of glorifying God. Following God’s purpose enables a clear witness even to those who want you dead.

Most of us have never experienced someone really wanting us dead. Yes,

- it may feel that way;

- we may say that the boss is trying to work us to death;
- or that government regulations are killing us.

But few, if any of us have known someone who wants us dead and is trying to kill us.

Paul faced this real, literal danger. We have seen it repeatedly on his missionary journeys. We see it in this section when he was in the temple with those four men completing their vows. 21:27-33,

“When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, ‘Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.’ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. At once he took along some soldiers and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he began asking who he was and what he had done.”

God used the Roman soldiers to keep the Jews from killing Paul. Paul spoke to the commander in Greek, appraised him of his Roman citizenship and asked to speak to the mob. Paul then told them about his background, conversion and call to serve God. This went well until he told them of God’s *specific purpose*, God’s *specific call* for his ministry as he related Jesus appearing and telling him, 22:21, “Go! For I will send you far away to the ... *Gentiles*” [emphasis added].

Then the mob “... raised their voices and said, ‘away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!’” (22:22). The Romans held Paul and on the next day decided to find out what this was all about by taking him before the Jewish Sanhedrin. Paul reminded them that he was a Pharisee and appealed to the Pharisees in the group saying he was “on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead” (23:6). This sparked a shouting match between the Pharisees and Sadducees. So the Roman soldiers took Paul back to the barracks for safety.

Then Luke records, 23:12-15,

“When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who formed this plot. They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, ‘We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down

to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near the place.’”

They wanted him dead!

In all of this Paul was guided by his purpose. He was not overcome by fear. He kept going, giving a clear witness to Christ, a clear defense of the gospel, even to those who wanted him dead.

Do we live for the glory of God when people criticize and pressure us for our ideas or efforts at work, school or in the community? When someone ridicules our faith in Christ, or Christ?

Following God’s purpose enables a clear witness and defense, even to those who want you dead, and even to those in power over you. What was the Roman commander to do with this mess? He sent Paul to Felix, the governor. There Paul gave a clear, compelling testimony more than once. But Felix procrastinated — personally and officially — and Paul remained in custody for two years (24:27).

Then Felix’s successor, Festus, heard Paul’s case. Paul again gave a straightforward, clear testimony and defense. Then King Agrippa didn’t want to be left out, telling Festus, “I also would like to hear the man myself” (25:22). So Agrippa and Festus heard Paul together. The conclusion of all this is in 26:32. Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” He found Paul not guilty of anything.

In each instance Paul kept his purpose in focus. It directed his thoughts and speech. His main goal was not to be vindicated and freed, but to proclaim Christ. Even his appeal to Caesar was part of his following the purpose of God on his life. Go back to the mob scene at the temple, 23:11, Luke writes,

“But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, ‘Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.’”

Paul’s purpose ...

- kept him close to God, relying on the Holy Spirit;
- kept him from getting sidetracked;
- kept him from stooping to his accusers’ level.

We all have people in authority over us in a variety of ways and settings. When the heat is turned up, do we hold to our purpose and allow it to keep us on track with a strong, clear witness and defense?

Following God’s Purpose Helps Maintain A Patient Trust In Him.

Following God’s purpose helps maintain a patient trust in Him even when we are treated unfairly. Paul knew that trouble was waiting for him in Jerusalem, but he didn’t know the specific timing or details. From the false and wild accusations of the mob around the temple, to

the murder plots of the Jews, to the callous indifference of Felix and then Festus and Agrippa ~~#~~ *all was unfair!*

Paul had done nothing wrong. He had not violated any laws of the Jews or Romans. In fact, that was King Agrippa's conclusion. On the other hand, there was plenty of prejudice, political expediency and personal indifference. Paul was not consumed by this, thinking and screaming "It's unfair! It's all unfair!" No. He kept God's purpose for him in focus and so he was *patient*, even when he was treated unfairly.

Think of a recent time when you were treated unfairly, or when something unfair happened to you. How did you respond? Yes, our circumstances are different from Paul's and those of each other. But the principle, the test is the same for all of us, whether it is losing your job, losing someone you love, getting blamed or criticized for something that really isn't your fault or being overlooked when you've worked harder and done a better job than the one getting the recognition and reward. Keep God's purpose for you in focus. It will keep you on track, patiently trusting God even in that unfair situation.

Then, following God's purpose helps maintain a patient trust in Him, even when things drag on and on. Let's review the chronology of the events in these six chapters.

- Paul arrived in Jerusalem at Pentecost, spring of 56.
- Shortly after that he was arrested and shipped off to Caesarea to await Felix's disposition of his case.
- He sat in prison for two years.
- Then Festus replaced Felix in 58, and the whole process started over.
- He was finally sent to Rome in the fall of 59 because of his appeal as a Roman citizen to be heard by the highest court, Caesar himself.

It was 3½ years from when he arrived in Jerusalem to when he was sent to Rome.

Paul was a man of action. He was always on the move. But this dragging on and on did not make him angry, resentful or bitter. Why not? Because he was constantly focused on God's purpose for him. He tried to glorify God in all situations. He tried to reach out with the gospel to Jews and Gentiles, to everyone he met. He was prepared to witness for Christ even at the very center of the world's power—Rome, and Caesar.

Some of our trials, some of our long dark nights go on and on and on. Some of them will go on as long as we are here on earth. Be careful not to minimize the difficulty, the struggle. Don't try to patch it over with cliches. Don't try to stuff it down with denial.

Be careful to face it. Face it knowing that in Christ and with His love, care and power you can walk through this. Face it focusing on God's purpose for you—His overall purpose for you of glorifying Him, the specific purposes in Scripture, and any particular purposes He has shown you.

Conclusion.

Sometimes life, its challenges, options and decisions may seem to be like that maze of railway tracks on the sermon booklet cover. There can be dangers and disasters if you throw the wrong switch and go on the wrong track. How do you sort it out? How do you make the right decision? How do you take and keep on the right track? Key, indispensable to that is purpose. *Keeping God's purpose in focus keeps you on track.*

As you reflect on this now, begin with the question, "What is my purpose?" Not, "What should be my purpose?" as good as that question is. But, "What is my purpose right now?"

Perhaps you have never really come to know God through Jesus Christ. If that is the case, you have no possibility of fulfilling the purpose for which you were created. But you can *get on track* by coming to Him now. Do that. Speak to me or someone else this morning who can listen and try to answer your questions and, most importantly, point you to God.

Perhaps you have been a believer for a while, even a long while, but you realize that you are living more for your own purposes than God's. Talk with Him about that now. Sort it out. Settle it.

The second question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism is, in my paraphrase, "What has God given us so that we may know how to glorify and enjoy Him?" Answer, "The word of God," the Scriptures, the Bible. Commit yourself to read and live God's truth, to truly glorify God in all you do.

© 2008. Lyle L. Wahl

Scripture, unless otherwise noted, taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®,
Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation.
Used by permission.