

Loved More Than Life

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Acts 20:18-24

Our grandsons have had several favorite superheroes. So, they have collected various action figures over the years. And masks. And capes. When I was a young boy, superheroes were born in comic books and moved only in the imagination. Modern superheroes are much more technologically advanced. They come to life in video games and movies.

Who was your favorite super hero? A cartoon superhero I recall from childhood is Mighty Mouse.

“Here I come to save the day. That means that Mighty Mouse is on the way.”

“There’s no need to fear. Underdog is here!”

Then there are heroes who had their own television programs. Among them were Sky King, Roy Rogers, and The Lone Ranger. More recently television has featured the heroics of real people in reenactments of actual events.

What goes into the making of a hero? The hero engaged in saving lives and rescuing people from danger. The stories always revolved around a crisis that created tension. Much of that tension related to the great risk taken by the hero, who takes whatever action is necessary to deliver the victim from danger. We are encouraged, and our hearts are stirred by accounts of people risking their lives to aid a complete stranger whose life is in jeopardy.

The book of Acts recounts actions of some of God’s action figures; telling the stories of men of action. Headlining the action are Peter and Paul. Unlike the make-believe superheroes who fascinate children, the apostles were real life individuals whose real life actions God used to save many.

My attention to the ministry of Paul today is prompted by an intriguing phrase regarding his motivation.

Acts 20 records Paul’s farewell address to the elders from Ephesus at Miletus. In his speech Paul rehearses his faithful ministry among them, saying (vv. 18b-21),

“You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now I have done the Lord’s work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials that

came to me from the plots of the Jews. I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike – the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus.” NLT

Then he turns his attention to the future. He previews what awaits him in Jerusalem.

“And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don’t know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. . . . And now I know that none of you will ever see me again.” (vv. 22, 23, 25) NLT

It is Paul’s declaration in verse 24 that challenges my thought. After revealing the anticipation of trouble in Jerusalem and expressing his expectation that these brothers would never see him again, Paul said,

“But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” NASB

“I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself.” In other words, **“I consider my life worth nothing to me” (NIV) “of no value to myself” (HCSB) “unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus – the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God” (NLT).**

This is not an expression of self-deprecation. Neither is it a false humility. To the contrary, it is a statement of priority. He says this in relation to the value and importance of God’s purpose in his life. **“So that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus.”** Specifically, **“to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.”** Finishing the work to which he was assigned by the Lord was Paul’s priority. It is what compelled him and propelled him to action.

Loved more than life to Paul was fulfilling God’s purpose of making known His grace. Paul’s priority is not personal gain or notoriety. He is intent upon fulfilling the mission to which he had been called and appointed by the Lord. His goal is that his life would direct attention to God’s marvelous grace.

“Oh, to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be.” – Robert Robinson, 1735-

Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing, by Robert Robinson (1758) public domain

Paul's priority inspires me. I want to be a man of action like Paul. I know that begins by adopting Paul's attitude because action emanates from thought, which influences attitude.

As a hero puts the well-being of others ahead of his own life, Paul here says fulfilling the ministry to which he was called is valued more than life.

ATTITUDE

My life will display this priority only as my attitude corresponds to that of the apostle Paul.

His letter to the Christians at Philippi reveals his love for the purpose of God more than for life. Paul expresses his desire that Christ would always be exalted in his body, whether in life or in death (1:20). **"For to me,"** Paul writes, **"to live is Christ and to die is gain."** (1:21). Living would result in fruitful labor, which would benefit the Kingdom (1:22-23).

Such humble submission to the will and purpose of God superseded selfish gain or glory. Paul said,

"But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. (I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. NLT) More than that, (everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. NLT) I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish (garbage NLT) so that I may gain Christ (and become one with him NLT). . . . I press on toward the goal (the end of the race) for the (heavenly) prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:7, 8, 14). He was addressing the contrast between pursuing righteousness on the basis of faith as opposed to law-keeping. But it is the principle or attitude of humble submission displayed by Paul that we emphasize. Concerning this attitude Paul urges us to follow his example (3:17).

The attitude Paul highlights in his letter to the Philippians is humility. **"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit,"** he wrote, **"but (be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves NLT)."** (2:3). Peter wrote, **"Clothe yourselves with humility (as you relate to NLT) one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble"** (1 Peter 5:5).

"I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself." That statement expresses humility.

Paul served with all humility. He did not have an inflated estimation of himself as he fulfilled his ministry. To the contrary, he considered himself among the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), the least of all saints (Ephesians 3:8) and least of the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:9). Paul led with an attitude of humble obedience to God. So should we.

Paul chastises the church at Corinth for their divisions resulting from loyalty to preachers (1 Corinthians 3:1-4). He asks rhetorically (vv. 5-6), **“What then is Apollos? And what is Paul?”** Not “who” but “what.” Then he answers his question, **“Servants through whom you believed. . . . but God was causing the growth.”**

Paul tells the Christians at Philippi, **“You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. He humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross”** NLT (Philippians 2:5, 8). Jesus’ humble obedience led to His death. While living we are to die to selfish will and privilege. Paul imitated Jesus in this regard, sacrificing what was due him as an apostle. Imitating the humble submission of Jesus, Who emptied Himself on our behalf (Philippians 2:7-8), Paul relinquished his rights so as to offer his ministry to the Corinthian church as a slave to all. Any benefits or privileges Paul could rightfully claim, but which might be an obstacle to evangelism, he willingly relinquished. Further, he adapted to others’ customs to win them to Christ. He learned to “speak their language” and draw upon their traditions and backgrounds to communicate the message of grace effectively. He did not consider his life – including his liberties – of any account as dear to himself. That is, he willingly relinquished rights and sacrificed liberties so as to gain a hearing. He did **“all things for the sake of the gospel”** (1 Corinthians 9:23). He did whatever he could **“to spread the Good News and share in its blessings”** (NLT). I must examine myself, asking how willing I am to sacrifice my traditions and liberties in the interest of more effectively proclaiming the gospel of grace.

Loving the purpose of God more than life becomes evident through our testimony of life and ministry. This attitude makes us people of confident action.

ACTION

Paul called upon the elders from Ephesus to attest to the fact that he had served with all humility and tears in the face of opposition from the Jews; that he never made it about himself but that it was always about the grace of God. They could testify to the impassioned pleas by Paul for people to repent toward God and to display faith in Jesus.

These elders could also attest to Paul’s boldness and courage, as evidenced by the fact that he preached the same message to Jews and Greeks alike, both publicly and privately. And they had witnessed his tearful disappointment whenever the message of grace was rejected.

When our lives are devoted to the purpose of God, we are empowered with confidence to face any challenge or threat. Humble submission to God's purpose produces confidence in the face of the unknown. Paul didn't know details about what awaited him in Jerusalem. All that mattered to him was the completion of his earthly mission. When persecution comes, I want to be able to say, "I esteem my life of no account, as if it were precious to myself." (Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament)

What he did know, however, is that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). That assurance, which he penned in his letter to the Roman Christians, provides further support to this declaration of priority given to his mission and message over the preservation of his physical life.

We can stand against any accuser assured that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). So, we can persevere, even in the prospect of persecution, confident that we are secure in the grace of God.

Paul's determination motivates us to persevere despite personal attacks. He was harassed at every step by his very own people. Like His Master, Jesus, Who was crucified by the very people He came to save, Paul was targeted by his fellow Jews. And just as Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), knowing full well that the cross awaited Him, so did Paul commit himself to finish the course set out for him. Each remained steadfast in fulfilling his earthly mission. This is the example we should follow.

Jesus willingly sacrificed His life for the redemption of all sinners. Paul expressed his sincere love for his countrymen by saying he would suffer their eternal judgment, if it could result in their salvation (Romans 9:1-3). Of course, no sinner could offer an atoning sacrifice. That does not diminish the sincerity of Paul's love for his unbelieving kinsmen. It does, however, lend credence to Paul's statement of priority for the mission over against his physical life.

"But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God."

When I come to the end of life's journey, I want to say with joy that I have fulfilled my ministry, completed the course set out for me by God, having fully discharged my duty with no regret; to say, with the apostle Paul (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the

faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

CONCLUSION

Jesus said, “**Greater love has no man than this than one would lay down his life for his friends.**” (John 15:13) That is what Jesus did for you. He loves you more than life itself. How deeply do you love Him? What specific way must you adjust your life to display the truthfulness of your claim that you love Him more than life itself?

I had the privilege of singing in a southern gospel quartet called the Preachers Quartet. It was comprised of the same four preachers and the same accompanist over the span of 33 years. Toward the end of our ministry as a quartet, we decided to vacation together in Yellowstone National Park. All of us, along with our spouses, spent a week seeing the sights in NW Wyoming. One of the guys bought a book in the park, entitled, “Death in Yellowstone.” It chronicled various ways people have died in Yellowstone. Among the most heart-wrenching were the stories about children who fell into thermal pools and were scalded to death. To add to the tragedy were the deaths of parents who dived in after their children. These accounts prompted a discussion among us about what we would do in a similar situation. One point upon which we all agreed is that we hope we are never in a position to have to make the choice. But our conversation expressed the sentiment that we love our children and grandchildren more than life itself.

Diving in after your child, whom you love more than life, costs you your life. Enlisting as a disciple of Jesus costs you your life. Loving God and His mission more than life, however, is a sacrifice worth making. It is through dying thus that we inherit life eternal. Jesus: “**Whoever will lose his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.**” (Matthew 10:39) May it be true of us that proclaiming the gospel of grace is loved more than life itself.

Prayer – Savior, More Than Life to Me by Frances J. Crosby, 1875

Savior, more than life to me,
I am clinging, clinging, close to Thee;
Let Thy precious blood applied,
Keep me ever, ever near Thy side.

Refrain:

Every day, every hour,

Let me feel Thy cleansing pow'r;
May Thy tender love to me
Bind me closer, closer, Lord to Thee.

Through this changing world below,
Lead me gently, gently as I go;
Trusting Thee, I cannot stray,
I can never, never lose my way.

Let me (I would) love Thee more and more,
Till this fleeting, fleeting life is o'er;
Till my soul is lost in love,
In a brighter, brighter world above.