

Acts 20:13-38

Outward Church: Passing the Baton

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I know some of our teens do track. I think that's pretty cool. I never did it, but my brother Matthew did the long jump and ran hurdles, 110 and 300. I love watching the Olympics, which are supposed to happen this summer in Tokyo. There are all sorts of great events, especially the team-relay events. The 4x100 involves four sprinters, who each pass a baton to one another before sprinting to their next partner.

Did you know that in the 2016 Olympics in Rio, in the 4x100, the women's team dropped the baton? The teammates, English Gardner, Allyson Felix, Tianna Bartoletta, and Tori Bowie, were almost disqualified. Bartoletta started the race, smoothly handing the baton to Allyson Felix, who sprinted down the track. But when Felix tried handing it to English Gardner, she tripped and dropped the baton. All was lost. But then she picked up the baton and passed it off to Gardner, who passed it to Bowie, who finished the race.

Allyson Felix realized that the runner from Brazil bumped into her, so they challenged the results. Rio was disqualified, and the USA women's team was allowed to run again, this time on a completely empty track and field. Felix said it felt really weird, but they were able to qualify for the finals.

Today, Paul is passing the baton to the elders at Ephesus. He's on his way to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit has told him that he is going to face hardship. And even though he has yet to write the letter to the Ephesians, this is the last time he will see them in person again. Here as he sprints towards Jerusalem, he wants to pass the ministry baton to the church's leadership and make sure that they run a good race going forward.

Acts 20:24 (ESV)

But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Paul wants to keep preaching the gospel, and he hopes that the church and Ephesus will continue to do the same. This summer I'm going on sabbatical for nine weeks. It's an opportunity to practice passing the baton for the race to keep going forward, even as I'm away for a brief period. Thankfully, I'll be back, and we'll continue the race together, but I want to do my very best to make sure you've got the baton. I don't want to be the one to drop it, and I want you to catch it so that we as a church can pursue God's plans going forward.

Now, we are running our race in a particular time and place, Westford, Massachusetts, and the surrounding communities. But Paul was running his race all around the Mediterranean. I'm putting up a map that shows the end of Paul's third missionary journey. Paul has already traveled all the way to Athens and Corinth and is now on the way back home. You can follow along as I read. Starting in Troas:

Acts 20:13-17 (ESV)

But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. And sailing from there we came the following day opposite Chios; the next day we touched at Samos; and the day after that we went to Miletus. For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

Paul could have traveled by land, 30 miles, several days journey, to Ephesus. He spent more time with Ephesus than he did any other church in his missionary travels, three years. Remember how the Holy Spirit forbade Paul to go to Asia (Acts 16:6)? It was all about God's timing. Now Paul is trying to make it back to Jerusalem by Pentecost, a Jewish holiday celebrating the harvest, and which commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit on the church (Acts 2:1-13). So he asks the Ephesian Elders, the church leaders, to come to him, and they do. It gives him another opportunity to pass the baton. As we look at his baton pass, we find four ways to keep running the race, to keep the ministry going.

Four ways to keep the ministry going forward:

1) Through genuinely loving the church. (v18, 36-38)

We find Paul deeply loves the church at Ephesus, the people, the elders.

Acts 20:18 (ESV)

And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia,"

Paul spent three years with the Ephesians. You know how you spell "love?" T.I.M.E. By spending time with the church, I don't mean spending a lot of time in a building. I mean spending time with each other, and not just the people we like in the church, but the people we don't know well. The men's firepit, women's firepit, and college firepits have all been great ways to spend time with our church family. Yes, I made an appearance at the women's firepit. I wanted a donut. We show our love for each other by spending time with each other. Look how much the people at Ephesus loved him back—skipping down to the last couple verses:

Acts 20:36-38 (ESV)

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

It's a really genuine scene. They kneel down, pray, weep, embrace, kiss, and then they accompany him to the boat to watch as he sails away. It reminds me of that last scene in the Lord of the Rings when Sam, Merry, and Pippin have to say goodbye to Bilbo and Frodo. They embrace and watch from the dock as they sail away to the Undying Lands. That's a little like what Paul is doing. He's sailing to Jerusalem, to go to Rome, and ultimately, to lose his life as a martyr for Christ. But before they go, they embrace and say goodbye. I remember when the Tangs left Cornerstone. Karyn and her kids stopped by the church on the way out. And I had the privilege of waving goodbye to them. I felt like I was representing Cornerstone, and I could feel their love for us as they left.

Monica, Mackenna, Alex, and I just did a discipleship intensive with the CCCC. In one of the trainings, we talked about how everything we do as believers begins with first loving God. It's out of genuinely loving God that we can love each other and the church. One of the most convicting things our trainer said was that if you're struggling with relationships in the church, chances are your relationship with God is not okay. Genuinely loving the church starts with genuinely loving God.

How can we foster that kind of love? Some of the things we do as we run our race actually help us foster that kind of love. Let's look at the next one. We also keep the ministry going...

2) Through receiving and sharing the gospel. (v19-26)

Acts 20:19-21 (ESV)

serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul taught them anything that would be good for them. He disciplined them publicly and personally. And he talked about the two main things that help us be in a relationship with God: repentance and faith. To know God, you need to admit your sin and receive forgiveness through faith in Christ. Gospel is the good news that Jesus forgives any who come to him. I went kayaking with Bernie this week, and he was telling me about how he's been preaching Galatians to the church in Worcester, and he keeps talking about grace, how God forgives and loves us despite anything we do. I think we see that grace here. Paul keeps telling them about God's grace, and that's what we need to remember too. We receive the gospel, then share it. We feel so touched by God's grace; we can't help but want to share it with others. This grace is good, no matter the circumstance.

Acts 20:22-26 (ESV)

“And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all,

Paul keeps pointing to Christ and the grace God offers. But Paul does something surprising. He says, “I am innocent of the blood of all” because he preached about the kingdom of God. Mark recently preached out of Ezekiel, and Paul jumps there too. He's making a “shout out” to the story of the watchman in Ezekiel 33:1-9.

God tells the prophet, Ezekiel, that if there's a **watchman** who sees the sword coming on the land, and he blows the trumpet, but the people don't listen, their blood is on themselves. But if there's a watchman who knows the sword is coming, and he does nothing, their blood is on his hands. Paul is saying, “I've warned you. Your blood is on your hands.”

Take a moment and think of the watchman who warned you. I came to Christ pretty early. I was only four. So my parents and church were the ones who acted as my watchman. I know for others it's a stranger, maybe someone who gave you a tract. But maybe it was a coworker or a friend. Let's take a moment and thank God for the watchmen, the sentries, in our life, who shared the gospel with us, warned us, and helped bring us into the kingdom. Now let's take a moment and ask God who we need to be a watchman for. Who might God be asking us to share the gospel with and to warn? If they don't listen, that's their choice, but let's not let it be said of us that their blood is on our hands because we never told them.

On July 4th, you as a church are, Lord willing, going to have an opportunity to share the gospel without me. The worship team is hoping to lead another service on the Westford common. This is an opportunity for the church to share the gospel. We're inviting an evangelistic preacher that week, one of Andy's friends, and he'll do a great job. Who will you invite? Who will you sound the alarm for?

We keep the ministry going forward four ways: 1) Through genuinely loving the church; 2) through receiving and sharing the gospel, and...

3) Through raising up elders to lead and protect the church. (v27-31)

We see here Paul addressing the elders of the church he spent three years of his life pouring into, likely before some of them were considered elders.

Acts 20:27-31 (ESV)

for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

As a church, we need to recognize elders who can lead and protect the church congregation. We need to disciple them, raise them up, equip them, and call them to lead us. It's not just the elders who do that, but everyone involved in discipleship, from children's ministry to youth ministry, all the way up. How do we do that? By learning the whole counsel of God.

I want to take a moment and plug a ministry of our church. This is one of the reasons we have a Christian Education hour and have had it on Zoom for the last year and a half. We want our church to know "the whole counsel of God" because it protects us from going astray. Terry Iles taught us Old Testament survey last year, and Monica Romig taught us New Testament survey this past spring. They're teaching us the whole counsel of God, and now Jennie is leading us to learn about worship through music. Knowing the Bible and theology help protect us from falling into wrong belief.

It's so easy to fall into believing whatever we want to believe. That's why we need to make sure we have good elders and leaders to guard and protect those that really understand the Bible. Paul warns them that fierce wolves are going to arise from their very group. That's why we need to keep a close eye even on our elders, as they too can go astray. Let's be in prayer for our leaders

John has just finished his sixth year, first on the Church Plant Ministry Team, then the Board of Elders. Our bylaws say you have to take a year at that point, which is really important, a season of rest. But that means after I return from sabbatical, it will just be Mark and myself serving as Elders. Two is not enough, but that's what we got for now. Please be in prayer that the Lord will raise up more. We want to do that, and we're constantly looking for opportunities.

We keep the ministry going forward four ways: 1) Through genuinely loving the church; 2) through receiving and sharing the gospel; 3) through raising up elders to lead and protect the church; and...

4) Through serving sacrificially. (v32-35)

Acts 20:32-35 (ESV)

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Paul sacrificed time and time again for the church, and they loved him in return. As the church body, we're called to serve each other sacrificially. To not do it for the money or the power or the recognition, but to, as I said earlier, do it all out of love. Paul loves the church like Jesus loves the church, and that's the way we're supposed to love the church too.

Back in verse 28, Paul said, “care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” God spilled his own blood for the church. We usually think about Jesus spilling his blood, but remember, Jesus is God. In some mysterious way, God bled for us, his church. God substituted his life for ours so that we might live. Wow, God must love us!

When the USA women’s team was preparing to run their final relay, English Gardner realized she hadn’t brought her “spikes,” her running shoes. That’s kind of important when running in the Olympics. But Allyson Felix brought an extra pair. They weren’t quite the right size, but she laced them up, and then they ran the race and won gold. The team that was almost disqualified for dropping the baton won the Olympics.

No matter if we’ve dropped the baton or aren’t feeling very fast lately, we have the opportunity to press into what God is calling us to do. I believe God has something special for Cornerstone this summer. I want it to be a season of rest, renewal, and grace at Cornerstone. But how we often receive those things is by seeing God move and do amazing things. I pray that he will. Let’s pray for that now.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. Why is passing the ministry baton so important? Who are you passing the baton to?
2. What does it mean to genuinely love the church? What are some ways to practice this as a spiritual discipline?
3. Who was your watchman, your sentry? Who sounded the alarm and shared the gospel with you?
4. Who do you need to be a watchman for? Who do you need to share the gospel with?
5. What is grace, and how does it fill us up? How can grace overflow?
6. What are elders, and why do they matter?
7. How are you raising up elders in your church? This is not just the job of the elders, but the whole church can take part, even from an early age.
8. How might you serve sacrificially? What does that demonstrate?

Sources

[Apostle Paul’s Third Journey large map](#)

[How Allyson Felix and Team USA won gold after dropping the baton | NBC Sports YouTube Video](#)