

FACING THE FUTURE (Acts 20:22-24)

We have deep concerns for our future in Kenya in view of the threat of terrorist bombings and forthcoming elections. We wonder if the culture of corruption will ever end. There are always more personal concerns – Will there be a job for me when I leave school? Where will I find a good marriage partner? What will Kenya be like when I retire? Will I even reach retirement age? So what if it were to be revealed to you what will happen in the future? What if you will never secure a job? What if sickness will bring you to an early death? What if you never find a suitable spouse? What if you are denied justice simply because you are a Christian? What if you have to flee your country and become a refugee? If so, you will be in company with Abraham (Genesis 12:10), with Joseph (Genesis 37:25-28), with David (1 Samuel 21-30), with Jeremiah (chapters 37-38), and with the apostle Paul, (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-29). The record in Acts 20 is about Paul on his way to Jerusalem at the close of his third missionary journey. What was his future, and how did he face it?

(a) *Paul's Future* (vv. 22-23). It was Paul's definite plan to go to Jerusalem (19:21, 20:16, see Romans 15:31), to take Gentile gifts to their Jewish brethren. Paul felt "bound in the Spirit", probably meaning that he had to go or he would be rebelling against God, even if danger awaited him. He did not know exactly what awaited him, but generally he knew that he would face "imprisonment and afflictions" in the future (see 9:16). It is amazing that this great apostle did not know in details the things that concerned him personally. He had to walk by faith, a step at a time, just as we must do. We also know that persecutions of one sort or another await us (2 Timothy 3:12), as well as the problems that anyone must face in this fallen world. We must therefore have the same attitude as Paul had.

(b) *Paul's attitude to the future* (v. 24).

- Negatively – "My outward condition in this world is not important to me." How long he lived in this world was not of value to him. He was not counting on reaching old age and retirement. His priority was not to keep out of danger at all costs, so that he experienced few problems. Are we really like this apostle of Christ? Are we putting our hope in uncertain riches (1 Timothy 6:17)? Are we laying up treasures on earth (Matthew 6:19)? Are we in love with this world (1 John 2:15-17)? Although it is true that we are not to be careless with our lives by throwing them away, think of the excuses that many people make not to do what the Scriptures command – "I am too tired, it is too far to go, there might be thugs, the weather is bad," etc. Paul would never have set his foot outside Antioch on his missionary journeys with such an attitude!

- Positively – "My priority is to fulfil the work that the Lord has given me to do." Paul had been entrusted with the "gospel of the grace of God" (see also 15:11). What a wonderful message. It was not like Jonah's message of deserved destruction (3:4). It was not a message that we should try to do our best and maybe God will accept us. Rather it is a message that God is ready to forgive all sin if you will confess your sin to Him and put your trust in Christ and His work of salvation on behalf of sinners. God will deal with your sins at no cost to you – He has borne the cost in His Son. This is God's free offer to all rebel sinners who seek His mercy in Christ. It was this message that Paul was determined to preach at every available opportunity, knowing that this is the only hope anyone has before God. He did not fear testifying to the Jews because they would probably oppose the message and persecute him; nor did he fear testifying to the Gentiles because they would probably mock him and reject the message as foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:23). It was enough that the Lord had called him

to preach, and he would be obedient unto death if necessary. Paul saw himself as a man running a race (= “course” in v. 24, see 2 Timothy 4:7). Athletes are willing to endure almost anything both before and during the race if only they win the crown. Athletes do not complain, “I have to train too much, I can’t enjoy life, I shall be too exhausted if I run to win”. Yet this is exactly what many Christians do. Although none of us have the same apostolic ministry as Paul had, we all have a ‘ministry’ from the Lord. A minister is a servant, and we are all servants. Pastors are called upon to equip the saints for their work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12). Giving of gifts to needy Christians is called a ministry (2 Corinthians 8:4 “relief”, 9:13 “service”). So, what is your aim and purpose in your life? Do you only have goals for things in *this* life – education, job, possessions, family? How are you serving the Lord in your home, in your job, in your school, and specifically in your local church? What particular gifts do you have which you use in order to minister? Let us begin where we are, with people who are around us all the time. Is it not our great aim to minister through our life and words so that God would be glorified through the salvation of sinners? Do you not pray, “Lord, save my children, save my spouse, save my work-mates and my school-mates, save the Sunday School children, make me useful in the extension of your kingdom”? Is this not why our Lord taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come”?