Long term commitments are something that our culture has struggled with for a long time now. Whether it’s a contract for a cell phone plan or a relationship, there are lots of people out there who will do whatever they can to not have to commit to anything long term.

I knew a couple several years ago who had each been married before and each had kids of their own. They began dating, moved in together, and one day announced that they were going to have a baby. They had been in a Bible study with me for a while that was all about how to have godly relationships. So I asked if they planned to get married. I’ll never forget what they said. They told me, “We’ve both had bad experiences with marriage before, and we just think it’s too big of a commitment for us right now. We’re going to see if this works out first.”

I looked from them, to the new baby she held in her arms, and I just had no words. Somehow the commitment of living together and raising a child together, raising their other six children together, was not as big and scary as the commitment of getting married. But here’s the thing. That’s the culture we live in.

Even when I was a kid, it was a rare thing for parents to get divorced. The kids I knew whose parents had been divorced were in the minority. Now the minority is kids whose parents are still together. People in our world today are afraid to commit to anything, they are afraid to devote their lives to something.

The problem is that being a disciple of Jesus is all about devoting your life to following after Jesus. When you make the decision to be a follower of Christ, you are making the decision to listen to him, follow him, and become more like him every day for the rest of your life. How far does that commitment go? How devoted are we really supposed to be? All we need to do is look to Paul for the answer to that question

Commitment and devotion are great words to summarize Paul’s life and ministry. Paul was not one to do things halfway. He didn’t shy away from preaching the Gospel boldly and doing what needed to be done no matter what the consequences. He gave everything he could to make sure that people heard about the Gospel of Jesus.

We’ve already seen in the book of Acts how Paul suffered over and over again. In fact, he knew that would happen from the moment he became a follower of Jesus. When God spoke to Annanias in Damascus, he said this to him. **Acts 9:15–16 ESV — 15** But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. **16** For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Paul’s suffering and all the things he had to go through were not without a purpose. Paul’s suffering wasn’t for his own sake. It wasn’t as a punishment for all the things he had done. It was all for the sake of the name of Jesus. It was to help the Gospel move forward. To help other people hear about Jesus.

On the first Resurrection morning, when the grave of Jesus was found to be empty, the Jewish leaders tried to start a rumor that his disciples had stolen his body and faked the whole thing. One of the clearest pieces of evidence that we have that the earliest followers weren’t making the Resurrection up and weren’t just fooling everyone is how much they suffered for their faith in Jesus.

All the Apostles except for John were eventually martyred for their faith in Jesus. It wasn’t for lack of trying that they didn’t kill John, he just survived their efforts to kill him, so they banished him instead. People do not willingly go to their deaths for a lie. There is some point at which it just wouldn’t be worth it anymore. But these men, and many others, willingly went to their deaths, they willingly suffered awful things, because they knew the Gospel of Jesus was true.

That was true of Paul as well. He was more than willing to endure anything he might come up against, as long as he was following after Christ. Paul knew that he would have to suffer for his faith in Jesus, but it was not often that he knew ahead of time what was going to happen.

I read a novel once about people who got lost in the Northwest Territories in Canada. Their bush plane crashed and they had to find their way home. One of the quotes that stuck with me from that book was from one of the bush pilots. He said, “I wish I knew where I was going to die, for I would never go near the place.” Most of us would probably feel the same way. But not Paul.

Rod taught us last week about Paul’s parting words to the Ephesian elders and how he was determined to go to Jerusalem no matter what he would face. **Acts 20:22 ESV — 22** And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there.

Back in Acts 11 the prophet Agabus had come from Jerusalem to Antioch, and he prophesied that there would be a famine in the world. That prophecy sparked disciples in Antioch to begin collecting aid to send to the church in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was a place where the majority of people were poverty stricken. Jerusalem was not a wealthy port of commerce like many of the places Paul ministered to. That meant the church in Jerusalem that would really struggle during something like a famine.

While Paul had also been planting churches and encouraging believers, he was also collecting aid for the church in Jerusalem and was determined to bring it back to them. We see him talk about that quite a bit in his letters to the churches.

We could assume that Paul was headed to Jerusalem for that purpose. But that doesn’t do justice to what Paul says here in Acts 20. Paul said he was “constrained by the Spirit”. That word constrained, or compelled in some translations, is a word that means to bind or tie something. The Spirit was urging Paul forward, and he felt he couldn’t resist what it was telling him to do. This was more than just a plan in Paul’s head, it was the Holy Spirit’s plan for him.

Paul and his companions left Ephesus, and Luke uses the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ throughout this section of Scripture, so somewhere along the line they hooked up with Luke again. They set sail and eventually ended up in the city of Tyre.

**Acts 21:4–6 ESV — 4** And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. **5** When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed **6** and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

Paul was not the only one the Spirit was speaking to. These disciples in Tyre knew that if Paul went to Jerusalem, things would not end well for him, so they tried to keep him from going. Paul wouldn’t be dissuaded though. He said another farewell that has a ring of finality to it, and they set sail again. This time they landed in Caesarea, and it became even more obvious that Paul’s time in Jerusalem would not go well for him.

While they were in Caesarea, Agabus showed up again. This time He had a prophecy that was specifically for Paul.

**Acts 21:10–12 ESV — 10** While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. **11** And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’ ” **12** When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.

Paul now had a clear picture of what was going to happen to him. He told the elders in Ephesus that the Spirit warned him in every city that prison and hardships were facing him, but he never knew when or how that would happen. Now he did. Now he knew that if he went to Jerusalem the Jews were going to bind him hand and foot and deliver him over to the Romans.

The people there in Caesarea knew it now, too. Not only the believers in Caesarea, but Luke says ‘we urged him not to go’. That meant Paul’s companions. Silas, Timothy, Luke, and probably a few others. The people who had seen him through every hardship, every imprisonment, every beating, every public mocking, every assassination attempt. These people who had been with Paul every step of the way and never discouraged him before were now pleading with him not to go to Jerusalem.

Why did these people who had always been supportive before now urge Paul not to follow the leading of the Spirit? They had been with him when he told the Ephesians how he was constrained by the Spirit. They knew this wasn’t just a whim, he wasn’t just going to see the sights of Jerusalem or catch up with his buddies. Paul was going to Jerusalem by the leading of the Holy Spirit. They knew that.

The problem here is something that we all face. Something that both Jesus and Paul warned us against. These disciples and even Paul’s companions allowed their focus to be dragged down to the things of earth. Their focus was on here and now, not on the things of God.

When they were confronted with the very real possibility of losing their friend and companion, they allowed their focus to get dragged down to earth. All along they had been right with Paul through every hardship, doing everything for the sake of the Gospel. But they lost that focus here. They began to focus more on what it would do to them to lose a friend than on what God could accomplish through Paul’s imprisonment, and possibly even his death.

We face the same problem. When we allow our focus to get dragged back down to earth by things like the never-ending responsibilities of parenting, the piles of paperwork on our desks, people who are rude to us on the road or at work, worrying about finances, or trying to win the latest debate on Facebook, then we will miss what God is doing in us and through us.

If we think of ourselves more as citizens of America than citizens of heaven, our focus is in the wrong place. If we would rather not talk to people about Jesus because it might be awkward, our focus is in the wrong place. If we are more worried about the earthly fate of the people we care about than their eternal fate, our focus is in the wrong place.

The disciples in Caesarea were worried about Paul, and rightly so. He was about to walk into a hotbed of persecution. They didn’t want to see their friend get arrested, or beaten, or worse. But they began to focus on the here and now, not on the eternal. They were focused on the things of man, not the things of God. Meanwhile, Paul never lost his focus.

**Acts 21:13–15 ESV — 13** Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” **14** And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.” **15** After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem.

Even when Paul knew that he was headed toward being arrested and handed over to the Romans, he never lost his focus on the things of God. He never lost his focus on the eternal. He never wavered for a moment because he knew that God’s plan for the spread of the Gospel was more important than his comfort, or even his life.

That is commitment and devotion on a level that most of us will never have to face. But should that moment come when you know you will suffer for your faith, where will you stand? Will you buckle under the weight of fear and uncertainty, or will you stand firm in your faith?

Maybe a better question in this context is when the worries and problems of life come at you, where will your focus be? Will you let the things of earth drag your focus down, or will you keep your focus on the things of God? How committed will you be?

Paul kept his focus on the things of God, so even under the weight of knowing he would be persecuted for his faith, he went to Jerusalem anyway. And don’t miss this part, Luke says ‘we got ready and went’. Paul’s companions lost their focus for a time, but they were ever faithful to stick with Paul no matter what.

When they got to Jerusalem, they told James and the elders all that had happened, and Luke tells us they glorified God because of all that God had done through Paul’s ministry among the Gentiles. But then they warned him yet again that there were Jews in the city who had been telling all who would listen that Paul was telling Jews and Gentiles alike to abandon the Jewish way of life.

James and the elders knew the danger Paul was in without even having to hear the prophecy from Agabus. They were living in Jerusalem. They were around that culture and those rumors every day. They knew the political and religious climate of their city, and the odds were not in Paul’s favor.

**Acts 21:27–28 ESV — 27** … Jews from Asia, seeing him [Paul] in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, **28** crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.”

This sounds like a pretty familiar story for Paul, right? The Jews were upset because he was breaking with tradition. He was challenging their customs, changing the way they did things by preaching the Gospel. Paul was probably used to that kind of treatment at this point, but this time he knew there would be no miraculous midnight jailbreak here. Paul knew he was in it for the long haul this time.

The Jews causing all the trouble stirred up the city and formed a mob. They dragged Paul out of the temple and Luke says they were seeking to kill him. Paul’s deliverance came in an unlikely form. A fortress called the Antonia was right next to the Temple in Jerusalem, and it housed a cohort of Roman soldiers, which would have been 1000 troops. The tribune was their commander. We learn in Acts 23 that his name was Claudius Lysias. As soon as the Claudius found out what was going on, he went down with his men to stop it.

Claudius had Paul arrested, and Luke says he bound him with two chains, which means he was bound between two Roman soldiers, one hand attached to each one. That word ‘bound’ is the same word that Agabus used in verse 11. Paul was now in the custody of the Romans, which was a safer place for him than with his own people.

It might seem like Claudius came to Paul’s rescue, but he was really just doing his job. It was his job to maintain peace in the city of Jerusalem, so if there was a riot or rebellion, he was expected to take care of it as quickly as possible, by force if necessary.

The Romans began carrying Paul into the barracks, into the Antonia. There were two flights of stairs that went from the massive fortress above directly down into the outer courts of the Temple. Before they went in, Paul asked to speak to the people, and he got it. This was the perfect place for him to give his testimony and tell the Jews about the Gospel. And that’s exactly what he did.

Paul made a defense to all those who just moments before were trying to kill him, but it was more than that. It was the Gospel message. It was Paul’s testimony about how he was just like them once and how everything changed when he met Jesus.

You know those teachers in school who just had the magic touch? They could look at the kids the right way, and a hush would just fall over the students? When Paul was speaking to this mob, the same thing happened. They listened to every word he said.

They listened to him talk about how he used to persecute the followers of Jesus. How he heard a voice on the road to Damascus, met Ananias, regained his sight, and was baptized. They listened to him with rapt attention until he told them that Jesus had commanded him to go to the Gentiles. Then they lost it.

**Acts 22:22–24 ESV — 22** Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.” **23** And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, **24** the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this.

Can you imagine that? People were making accusations against him, so surely the best way to find out the truth was to beat the man being accused. But before they could land the first blow, Paul played his Roman citizen card.

It was lawful for Roman officials to beat or execute just about anyone who wasn’t a citizen of the Roman Empire. But if someone was a citizen of the Roman Empire, there were certain benefits afforded to them. Citizen’s couldn’t be executed except for the most heinous crimes, and then they had to be executed in a civilized manner. Roman citizens were not allowed to be crucified, and they were not allowed to be beaten or arrested without just cause, as they were about to do to Paul. Even Claudius, the tribune, was afraid because they had bound Paul.

That one statement put the brakes on the whole works. Claudius gathered the Jewish leaders together to figure out what the problem was, and Paul again testified before the leaders of the Jews. What Paul said caused such an uproar that the Jews began to fight with one another and things started to get violent. Claudius had Paul removed and taken back to the barracks, and then we read this.

**Acts 23:11 ESV — 11** The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”

Paul had testified boldly in the face of his accusers even though he knew that he would not be done with this imprisonment for a long time, if at all. But he stood firm in his faith and continued to share the Gospel whenever he had the chance. Jesus came to him and encouraged him, and also let him know that he was going to Rome.

This was not a vacation. Things were not going to be pleasant for Paul. He would be in chains all the way to Rome, and for two years in Rome. His testifying would be in front of the people who would decide if he lived or died. But Paul was faithful to continue speaking about Jesus all the way.

Paul was committed to his faith and to spreading the Gospel of Jesus. He was devoted to doing God’s work no matter what happened to him. Could the same be said of us? How do we stay committed like Paul did? How do we make sure we are ready to stand up for Christ no matter what situation we find ourselves in?

We can learn a lot from Paul when he was facing one of the toughest times of his life. I want t highlight three things that Paul did really well here that we need to put into practice in our own lives if we want to have the kind of commitment and devotion that Paul did.

1. Keep your focus on the things of God

Paul’s companions might have lost sight of the things of God when they were afraid of losing their friend, but Paul never did. Even knowing exactly what he was walking into, Paul never wavered. He followed the leading of the Holy Spirit no matter where it led, and no matter what it meant for him.

His companions made their arguments from a place of fear. Paul made his decisions from a place of faith, knowing that God would work through whatever happened.

Look at all that God accomplished because of Paul’s imprisonments. Paul was able to give his testimony and share the Gospel from the steps of the Antonia. He witnessed to the tribune in charge of 1000 soldiers, he spoke directly to all the Jewish leaders. Later he got to speak in front of Felix, Festus, and then we don’t know who all in Rome itself. While Paul was in prison in Rome, he wrote a letter to the Philippians, to the Colossians, the Ephesians, and to a man named Philemon. All of which we now have in our Bibles as a part of Scripture.

God did amazing things through Paul’s imprisonment and all the adventures he had along the way. That was only possible because Paul kept his focus on the things of God.

1. Take advantages of opportunities to share the Gospel

Paul took every opportunity he could to tell his testimony, and to tell people about Jesus Christ. It didn’t matter where he was, what was happening to him, or what might happen to him if he spoke up. Paul never wasted a chance to tell people about Jesus.

How many of us can say the same thing? How many of us miss an opportunity to talk about Jesus because we feel awkward, or it’s out of our comfort zone? We don’t talk about our faith at work because we don’t want our relationships with our coworkers to get weird? We don’t talk about our faith with our family, because religion and politics are taboo topics at family get togethers?

One thing I learned on the mission trip: hang out with Cassie Lipscomb long enough and you’re sure to hear the words ‘You might be the only Jesus they will ever see’. It will probably only take about 20 minutes or so. How true that is, though. What if we really are the only Jesus a person will ever see, and we decide to pass because we just aren’t very comfortable? I doubt Paul was very comfortable chained between two Roman guards, but that didn’t stop him. Don’t ever pass up an opportunity to share Jesus with someone else.

1. Don’t ever write people off

If anyone ever had a reason to write people off as a lost cause, it was Paul. These people in the Temple had literally been trying to kill him moments before he begged for an opportunity to speak to them and tell them about Jesus. Paul didn’t write them off no matter what. I think the reason is that Paul himself was about as much of a lost cause as you could get before Christ got through to him. Think about this: if Jesus could get through to Saul, the man who killed Christians for their faith, he can get through to anyone.

How many people do we write off thinking, ‘They will never change, they will never care, they will never respond to Jesus’.

My dad grew up in a broken home. He was the oldest of three siblings, and life was rough for them as kids with only their mom to raise them and provide for them. My dad, by the grace of God, followed in the footsteps of his mother and grandfather and ended up being a rock solid man of God. His siblings did not. They both ended up with broken marriages, children who went off the deep end because they had grown up in broken homes. Family gatherings were not much fun. I spent most of my life thinking they would never change.

But then when I was already in college, both of his siblings began to attend a little church in the town they lived in with their spouses. All of a sudden, when we would go for Christmas or Thanksgiving, my uncle was asking me all about theology and what I was learning at Lincoln, asking how to study the Bible correctly. Just a couple of years ago, I got to watch a video of my uncle being baptized, and a few weeks later a video of him baptizing his son. People who years before I never would have imagined would change the way they lived, and now they are committed followers of Jesus Christ.

Don’t ever write anyone off. You might be persecuted, mocked, and attacked. But maybe Jesus is giving you an open door to share him with the very people who are coming after you. You might have people in your life you think will never change. If Jesus can reach Paul’s heart, he can reach anyone’s. Stay committed, keep your focus on what’s important for eternity, and God can use you to reach even those who persecute you.