

PAUL AND THE ALEXES: COMMITTED LIVES
ACT 20:13-24

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Alexander Ogorodnikov (PROJECTOR ON--- ALEXANDER OGORODNIKOV) grew up in the Russian Orthodox Church. As a young man living in the Soviet Union he embraced the Christian faith as his own. He discovered, however, that the church of his childhood had been seriously compromised. Russian Orthodox leaders had decided that in order to survive in a Communist country some things had to be given up. Unfortunately some things became many things. In the end the only thing that the Soviet government would tolerate was worship services. The leadership of the church at both national and local levels was infiltrated by the KGB and its informers.

Alexander decided that if the church could not fulfill its Christian responsibility, then individual Christians would have to do the job. So he set out to live a committed Christian life in the midst of a hostile society. In 1971 he formed an informal group called the Christian Seminar, which was comprised of Christian intellectuals. Alexander himself worked at the Moscow Institute for Cinematography. But in 1973 he was expelled for producing a film about Christians.

The other individuals who were the object of Alexander's influence also began to suffer persecution. Some lost their jobs, some were beaten, some were jailed, some were sent to psychiatric hospitals. Alexander tried to live out of sight of the authorities. But in 1978 he was arrested and taken to the Lubyanka prison in Moscow. (LUBYANKA PRISON) There the KGB officials offered him the opportunity to leave the country and avoid going to prison. Alexander's response was: "**This is my country. You are the alien elements that are disrupting the country. You should leave instead.**" They stayed, and Alexander went into the Gulag.

About the same time when Alex Ogorodnikov was facing his first round of persecution, another Alex was born, who was to become even more famous in Russia for his opposition to Russian dictators. His name was Alexey Navalny (ALEXEY NAVALNY) He was born to a Russian army officer in Butyn, Russia.

Committed Christians stand out in a society which is marked by compromise, whether that society is the Communist USSR, present day Russia, modern America, or the first century Roman Empire. (PROJECTOR OFF) The passage before us this morning describes characteristics of, and the ingredients which go into, the development of a committed Christian. We are going to examine some of those hallmarks from the example of the Apostle Paul and the example of a couple of Alexes.

I.

First, from vv. 13-16 of Acts #20 we are going to consider THE PREPARATION OF A COMMITTED LIFE. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE PREPARATION OF A...) We have seen from our study of Acts that the Apostle Paul had been uniquely equipped by God for the role he was to play in the church of Christ. Paul had been trained as a rabbi under the most famous Jewish rabbi of his day. As a result he knew the Scriptures thoroughly. By personality he was an intense and dynamic individual. At first that zealousness was directed against Christians. But on the road to Damascus Paul had a supernatural encounter with the risen Christ that transformed him forever. The Lord called him to be His apostle to the Gentiles.

The Book of Acts does not describe it directly, but from it and from Paul's epistles we get hints about the personal spiritual life that he cultivated. Today's passage, I believe, contains one such hint about the preparation of a committed life.

(THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY) Last time we left off with the apostle's third missionary journey drawing to an end. We saw Paul finish up his three year stay at the city of Ephesus. He went from there back into Macedonia to encourage the Christians in this area. Then he spent three months in Achaia, probably mostly in Corinth. During this time he was also collecting money that was to be given to the Jewish Christians of Judea, who were faced with a severe famine. Representatives of the churches of the region were going with Paul to Jerusalem. (THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY RETURN) They had stopped to visit the Christians at Troas. During a late meeting on their last night in the city a boy nodded off to sleep, fell out of the window, and died. But Paul miraculously raised him from the dead.

So in v. 13 the Christian leaders were about to depart from Troas. At Troas in the spring, which this was, a north wind typically comes up sometime after midnight and blows toward the south until the afternoon. It is likely that the ship upon which these Christians had booked passage left port sometime in the middle of the night when this wind came up. Paul's companions, including Luke, were on this ship. Paul was not. He had decided to walk to the next stop.

The next stop was a town called Assos. To get there by sea a boat had to go around a long peninsula. The distance was about 40 miles. A sea voyage from Troas would have taken most of a day. The distance to Assos on the Roman road was only 20 miles. (ASSOS ROAD) Verse 13 says that Paul took the road. [This is what that road between Troas and Assos looks like 2000 years later. The Roman knew how to build roads that last.] (PROJECTOR OFF)

Keep in mind that Paul had been up all night. Though there was a good Roman road to follow, it would still require an eight or nine hour hike at a good pace to get to Assos. Paul had to be a pretty tough character. Why didn't he just take the boat? We are not specifically told.

One factor was probably the all night meeting in which he had been involved. The text says that it was about midnight when Eutychus fell down and died. Paul had to hang

around for a while after he raised him from the dead. It would have been tough to get away from a group of Christians who had just seen such a tremendous miracle. If the boat was leaving after midnight, the other guys had to get going to catch it.

The others could have stayed with Paul and caught up with the ship at Assos, however. The impression the text leaves us is that he went alone. My reading of the situation is that Paul wanted to have time alone. His seven day stay at Troas was apparently filled with activity. Before Troas Paul had been visiting the church at Philippi. Now he was about to embark on a sea journey back to Judea. He was with friends, and there wasn't a whole lot of privacy to be found on a first century ship. My suspicion is that Paul wanted to have some time alone with God. He knew that trouble was waiting for him in Jerusalem. He was planning to meet with the elders at Ephesus in a few days and give them instruction and encouragement. My speculation is that Paul wanted to spend time in prayer and meditation. Walking to Assos gave him that opportunity. Time spent in prayer and reflection upon God's Word is one of the vital ingredients of a committed Christian life.

One of the challenges that Alexander Ogorodnikov faced when he went to prison was the refusal of the authorities to let him have a Bible. In November of 1978 he was sentenced to one year in prison for anti-Soviet agitation, propagandizing and "parasitism." Eventually he was to spend 8 ½ years in prison. Alexander recognized the essential nature of having a Bible in order to maintain his spiritual life in the midst of such trying circumstances. So he began a hunger strike to get a Bible. He was willing to die in pursuit of the right to have a regular intake of God's Word. That strike lasted for eight months. The Soviets decided that it would be bad for their cause if Alexander starved. So they forced food into him. Eventually they gave in to his demand for a Bible.

In this land of freedom how many of us who call ourselves Christians go for days or even weeks without opening this Book that brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world have been willing to die to obtain? If we are serious about having a committed Christian life, we must cultivate our personal spiritual lives. Essential to that is time spent with God in prayer and in reading His Word.

Perhaps that devotional life might also include Scripture memory. It is part of my daily devotions. The other Alex, Alexey Navalny became a leading political figure in Russia who tried to run against Vladimir Putin in a 2018 election. But he was arrested and put in jail on contrived charges.

In his early life Alexey was an atheist. That was part of his Russian education. Alexey earned a law degree in 1998 and got a Masters degree in economics in 2001. He even spent a semester at Yale University.

Largely as a result of his interaction with Christians in prison he became a follower of Jesus. During one stint in prison he sought to memorize the 111 verses of the Sermon on the Mount. I have memorized Matthew #5. But he memorized the entire Sermon on the Mount in Russian, English, French, and Latin. Such was his preparation for a committed life.

At Assos (PROJECTOR ON--- THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY RETURN 01) Paul found his traveling companions and got on the ship with them. For the next several days they followed the coastland of what we know as Turkey. Then they stopped for several days at the port of Miletus. Verse 16 says, **“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..”**

Paul and his Christian colleagues probably had no say as to where the ship was going to stop. The schedule of the ship had been decided before it left by the captain and the ship owner on the basis of the freight they were picking up and delivering. The Christians had chosen this boat partly because it was not scheduled to stop in Ephesus. Paul apparently feared that a stop at Ephesus would take too much time. With his strong Christian ties in that city, it might be difficult to pull away from the Christians there. Ephesus was a busier port. Perhaps it also would have taken longer to load and unload there. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul was wanting to be in Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Pentecost. We saw earlier in this chapter that he was at Philippi in Macedonia for Passover. Pentecost came fifty days after that feast. At least 24 days had already passed by the time they got to Miletus. So Paul was wanting to keep moving.

Why was being in Jerusalem for Pentecost so important to Paul? Pentecost was an important feast day for all Jews. But I suspect that there may have been a practical benefit that came from being in Jerusalem on a feast day. A central purpose of their mission to Jerusalem was to distribute money to buy food for Jewish Christians throughout the area who were suffering because of the famine. It would mean a lot of work to visit all of the outlying areas with financial aid for the Christians. If they could meet up with representatives of the local churches at the feast in Jerusalem, it would save them a lot of time and energy.

II.

We come then to vv. 17-21. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE NATURE OF A COMMITTED LIFE) In this section we are going to consider **THE NATURE OF A COMMITTED LIFE**. Verse 17 says that Paul sent word to the elders of the church at Ephesus that he was at Miletus and that he would like to see them. Miletus (EPHESUS MILETUS) was thirty miles from Ephesus, as the crow flies. It was somewhat longer by road. Going to see Paul meant probably at least a three day round trip. But they came. Paul had no doubt made a tremendous impact upon their individual lives. They didn't want to miss what could be their last opportunity to ever see him. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Notice the plural form of “elders” used in our text. Whenever the leadership of a church in the New Testament is mentioned, it is always in the plural form. Churches were not led by a single elder, or pastor. There appears to always be a plurality of leaders.

In the Book of Acts Luke records eight different sermons, or messages, that Paul gave. We have examples of messages that Paul preached to Jews, to unbelieving Gentiles, and to Roman officials. The message that begins in v. 18 is the only example in the book of a message that Paul gave to fellow Christians. But it does have resemblances to passages in the epistles written by Paul.

The message to the Ephesian elders is primarily one of encouragement. We looked last week at Paul's focus on encouragement. But there is also an apologetic tone to this message, and I mean apologetic not in the sense of "I'm sorry" but in the Biblical sense of a defense of the gospel and the ministry. Paul begins by defending his ministry in Ephesus, which he had left perhaps a year and a half earlier. His opening remarks suggest that somebody was criticizing and attacking Paul. Perhaps it was the Judaizers, those Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentile followers of Jesus had to become Jews to be fully right with God. The critics were probably also twisting his message.

Whenever a committed Christian makes an impact on the world, he or she will encounter critics and people who seek to distort the message. Even though Alexander Ogorodnikov was behind bars, Christian friends on the outside spoke up for him. Christians in the West found out about him. So the KGB set out to criticize Alexander and to distort his message. One intellectual who knew him slightly was compelled to take part in a TV interview where he called Alexander "a new Rasputin." The KGB also pressured a number of intellectuals and dissidents to write public letters criticizing Alexander and his message. A committed life has an impact upon the world, but there is a cost involved. Such can be the nature of a committed life.

The encouragement comes from knowing that the truth outlives the criticism. We don't know who Paul's critics were at Ephesus. We do still know about Paul. Alexander Ogorodnikov's critics have long since been discredited. Alexander is much respected in Christian and even non-Christian circles today. After his release from prison Alexander established the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Mercy Society. He established the first homeless shelter in the country and a drug rehab facility.

The other Alex--- Alexey Navalny--- in 2011 founded the Anti-Corruption Foundation. He had a popular You tube channel with millions of subscribers. He produced a couple of documentaries which showed the corruption of top government officials in Vladimir Putin's United Russia Party. For some unknown reason President Putin had Navalny put in prison.

The town of Miletus (MILETUS RUINS) was a bustling seaport in Paul's day. It had a large outdoor theater like the one in Ephesus. But today Miletus is in ruins, and the only thing that any of us know about it is the conversation that the Apostle Paul had with a handful of Christian men. Paul had a life of impact. That impact stemmed from a commitment to pour Himself and God's Word into people. (OVERHEAD OFF)

Paul begins his remarks in vv. 18-20 with a description of his manner of ministry. He reminds his friends, "**You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time**

from the first day that I set foot in Asia, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house..."

In his description of Paul's ministry at Ephesus earlier in Acts Luke did not mention any plots by the Jews. Clearly there was adversity in this ministry. But in the midst of trials Paul gave his time and energy and knowledge to those who would listen to him. He engaged in this teaching and preaching in public and in private, as he visited people in their homes.

The objects of Paul's teaching, according to v. 21, were "both Jews and Greeks." Religious Jews of the first century tended to have a negative attitude toward Gentiles. Even Gentiles who converted to Judaism could never attain the same religious and social standing as a full blooded Jew. But the Lord Jesus Christ had revealed to the Apostle Paul that the gospel was to be freely available to all people regardless of their ethnic background.

Paul summarizes the content of this gospel message in v. 21 as consisting of "**repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.**" Sometimes "faith" and "repentance" are used synonymously in the New Testament in relationship to saving trust in Christ. Sometimes there is a slight distinction intended in their meaning. "Repentance" means to turn to God from sin. So there is a consciousness of sin that is inherent in the term. "Faith" connotes only the positive aspect of trusting, in this case, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Paul was at Athens, he likewise focused his message to the pagan intellectual audience there on the concept of repentance. He argued for the existence of one God, as opposed to the Greek acceptance of many gods, and for the recognition of man's state of sinfulness before this one God. (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 17:30) In Acts #17 v. 30 he told the Athenians, "**The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent...**" This sense of the word "repentance" seems to involve a recognition of an individual's sinfulness and a seeking of a relationship with the single sovereign God of the universe. The next necessary step is coming to know about Jesus and putting faith in Him as the Son of God and Savior of the world. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It was the significance of this message of eternal salvation that motivated not only Paul but also Alexander Ogorodnikov. By the late 1970s there were about 300 intellectuals involved in his Christian Seminar organization. They were scattered among several Soviet cities, and Alexander went around visiting them and encouraging them and making suggestions about how they could communicate with each other without being caught by the KGB.

When Alexander was finally arrested and sentenced, he was sent to a prison in eastern Russia. His Christian views soon began to have an impact upon the prison population.

The prisoners banded together to find ways for him to move from barracks to barracks so he could encourage people and point them to faith in Christ. Prisoners would exchange their uniforms with their names on them so that Alexander could enter barracks other than his own. Each prisoner had a labor quota that he was required to fulfill. Prisoners volunteered to fulfill Alexander's labor quota so that he could have more time to carry out his personal ministry.

You see, a committed Christian does not need a particular kind of living or working situation to have a life of impact. Paul is thrown into prison in Philippi, and the jailer becomes a Christian. Alexander gets sent to Siberia, and a revival breaks out in the prison. We can be useful wherever we are.

Some years later Alexander was in another Soviet prison when a prison official objected to the cross that he wore around his neck. The official demanded that he take it off. According to Alexander he responded, **"I will never take it from my neck. You must understand that this is my belief. I confess it before these people. I want to warn you that the Lord will never be humiliated. I am nothing, but I am a son of the Lord. If you are against me, you are against him. I warn you."**

The official and the guards proceeded to beat Alexander unconscious and to take off that cross. The official was a big, strong, athletic man. But two days later he disappeared from camp. Later guards told Alexander that the man had developed an acute bile disorder. The prison clinic could not help him, and even medical doctors from Moscow couldn't help him. Two months later the guy was buried in the prison cemetery. **"After that,"** said Alexander, **"the prison officials were afraid to touch me."**

I suspect that many of us Christians would like to have a greater impact upon our world for Jesus. I also suspect that we often consciously or unconsciously think that if only our situation in life was a little different, then we could really be used by Jesus. If only my health was a little better, or if only I had a better place to work, or if only my mate was more interested in spiritual things, or if only my finances were better, or if only my schooling was done, then I would be able to make an impact upon the world. The example of Paul and the example of the Alexes teach us that the issue is not our living circumstances. The issue is our commitment to Jesus Christ. A committed Christian can't help but make an impact upon the world. You can't even stop a committed Christian from doing that by throwing him or her in jail.

III.

We come then to vv. 22-24 and THE TEST OF A COMMITTED LIFE. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE TEST OF A COMMITTED LIFE) Paul's commitment was tested a number of times during his missionary journeys. Here it is tested again by the knowledge that trouble is waiting for him in Jerusalem. In v. 23 he says that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to him in every city that bonds and afflictions await him. Apparently Christians with the gift of prophecy in some of these churches along the way are telling him by means of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that trouble is brewing. Paul doesn't know

exactly what form this trouble will take. The Lord doesn't usually reveal such details to His children. We are always commanded to walk by faith, not by sight.

The knowledge that trouble was waiting for him in Jerusalem could have prompted Paul to look for a ship headed in the other direction. However, in v. 24 Paul says, **“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.”** The test was: Who is in charge? Paul had long ago decided that Jesus was going to be in charge of his life. So finishing the course laid out for him by the Lord became his priority in life.

The word for “course” that Paul used was originally a sports term. It referred to a running course. Here it has to do with the course of life laid out for the apostle by the Lord Jesus. That course, or ministry, for Paul primarily involved evangelism. It was a verbal witness to the gospel of the grace of God. The food relief mission in which he was now engaged seemed to be a part of the overall plan. The bringing of substantial food aid from mostly Gentile churches to needy Jewish Christians at the eastern end of the Roman Empire was indeed a powerful testimony to the grace of God.

So even though Paul knew that bonds and afflictions were waiting for him in Jerusalem, he didn't waiver from his course. He was convinced that this was what God wanted him to do. The issue of who was going to be in charge of his life had been decided long before. In a letter to the Philippians he had previously written, **“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”**

Lenin once wrote that Communists are dead men on furlough. In our days we have seen Communism decline in influence because its beliefs do not ultimately correspond with reality. But Communism has had such a tremendous impact upon the world in our generation because many of its advocates were committed individuals. They were willing to give everything, including their lives, for the sake of their beliefs. They acted as dead men on furlough. How much more that should be true of us who are Christians, who have the answers to life's most important questions, who know where we are going to spend eternity because of the One who died for us!

During the course of his life Alexander Ogorodnikov (ALEXANDER OGORODNIKOV) was given several opportunities to leave the Soviet Union. But Alexander was convinced that such was not the course that the Lord had laid out for him. Before he went into prison the first time he had a meeting with some of his fellow believers where he told them, **“Great deeds start with victims. We have to prove our words are not empty, and we have to prove them with our blood and our flesh. It is a great privilege to suffer for Jesus Christ. Pardon me for these lofty words. But I cannot refuse this privilege.”**

So Alexander went to prison. Still the KGB sought to break him. They put him with the worst criminals. Only those criminals ended up becoming responsive to his message of the gospel. At various times Alexander was beaten. His prison sentence was extended.

He was given further opportunities to emigrate. But because he was committed to the course laid out for him by his Lord, he would not change.

Perhaps his most severe test came when he was finally released from prison in 1987. He went home only to discover that the KGB had succeeded in persuading his wife to divorce him. On the day that Alexander was released she married another man. But Alexander passed all of the tests of commitment. At last report he leads the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Mercy Society. These organizations are responsible for feeding and clothing 7000 needy people each month. He also began an orphanage for abandoned girls in St. Petersburg.

A positive impact upon the world will come from a life lived in commitment to Jesus Christ. That commitment needs to begin in the situation where we find ourselves. The story of Paul and the story of Alexander teach us that a person sold out to Jesus Christ will have an impact upon the world in whatever environment he finds himself. That environment may involve our school, our job, our neighborhood, or even our task of raising children.

On August 20, 2020, Alexey Navalny suddenly became sick on a flight to Moscow. A plane from Germany was sent to rescue him. It brought him to Berlin (ALEXEY NAVALNY HOSPITAL), where doctors determined that he had been poisoned with a nerve agent called Novichok. After several months of recovery, he decided to return to Russia.

On January 17, 2021, he was arrested upon his return to Russia by FSB agents (ALEXEY NAVALNY AND WIFE) and charged with violating terms of his probation for leaving Russia. Other fabricated charges were lodged against him. Navalny returned despite his realization that this would probably happen. Why did he do it? One newspaper declared, **“He knew that Russians admire the uncompromising.”**

This Alex was sentenced and sent to a remote Siberian prison camp. One day on a walk he fell ill and died. He was only 47. Everyone knew that he was killed on directions from Vladimir Putin. This is what happens to his strongest opponents.

An autobiography of sorts was published after his death. (PATRIOT) In it he wrote, **“But now I am a believer, and it helps me a lot in my activities because everything becomes much, much easier... because there is a book in which, in general, it is... clearly written what action to take in every situation. It's not always easy to follow... but I am actually trying... As I said, it's easier for me probably than many others to engage in politics.”**

Want to have a positive impact upon your world? Become a committed Christian. Spend time in prayer and Bible study. Work out that commitment in the circumstances in which you find yourself. Serve with humility, teach, encourage.

In his memoir Alexey Navalny leaves us with these thoughts: “**My job is to seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and leave it to Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else. They won’t let me down and will sort out all my headaches. As they say in prison here: they will take my punches for me.**” He then challenges his readers with this: “**Are you a disciple of the religion whose founder sacrificed himself for others, paying the price for their sins? Do you believe in the immortality of the soul and the rest of the cool stuff? If you can honestly answer yes, what is there left for you to worry about?**”