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Better than Life
Acts 20:22-25

Abandon. Webster's dictionary states it means to give oneself over unrestrainedly. Standing on a narrow plank jutting from a bridge 167 ft. above the Kawarau river just north of Queenstown, New Zealand, I attached the word reckless to the word abandon. I looked down, which was not a good idea because the rushing water below that seemed to grow increasingly farther away from me. Looking down at my ankles, I saw some black webbing had been wrapped around my ankles and a carabineer clipped to a rope which was then tied to an elastic cord. Since it was tied around my ankles and not a harness about my chest I determined I would be asked not to jump from this insane height, but actually to dive from it, headfirst. Somehow jumping seemed more palatable to my gut. Either way I knew that if the rope did not hold, I would be a goner. I had been shown the strength tests of the elastic cord and assured that it could withstand a shock of 5000 pounds. I was well within that limit. I was told that AJ Hackett Queenstown was the birthplace of the bungee jump and had over 10,000 jumps with not one injury. I still was very nervous. They asked how far down I would like to go, as they needed to adjust the length of the rope to my weight. I told them I would like to get my moneys worth, but I don't want to get too wet, just get my head wet and that should be good enough. The instructor who continually sang old Beattles tunes in his New Zealand accent told me he would count down from 5 and then I was to dive. I dove and the fear of reckless abandon was downed out only by my yelling at the top of my lungs. The first 7 story drop is a straight freefall and you don't even feel the bungee cord starting to slow you down until about 100 ft. But it does and amazingly smooth, you hit the water softly, there

is a slight pause and then you are rocketed backwards feet first up another 10 stories high. That's when it becomes fun. When your mind tells your body that the rope is going to hold, fear turns to exhilaration.

Let me read to you this mornings scripture. READ Acts 20:22-25. Do you think that Paul's abandonment to God was reckless? As he knowingly sailed into a life threatening future in Jerusalem? I would suggest to you that even though many people around him said, Paul you are crazy, your insane don't do this Paul. In Paul's mind it was not reckless at all, but in his perspective, following God eliminated all risk. Paul knew that God is far more reliable than any bungee cord. Far reliable then a strength of materials certificate. Far more reliable then 10,000 injury free customers. Paul had made his view of God very clear in his writings and his confidence was not unfounded and reckless, but based on what he knew to be true about God. Paul had come to the place of such supreme confidence in God that he knew faithfulness to God was better then even life itself.

Its been a couple of weeks since before Easter that we have been in Acts so lets recall what is happening here. Paul had spent 3 years ministering in the city of Ephesus, teaching and building up the church and pouring himself into the leaders. He wanted one last time to meet with them and so on his way back to Jerusalem, his boat lands in a town called Miletus, just 20 miles south of Ephesus. He calls the elders down to meet with him at Miletus so he can gives them some last words of challenge and encouragement. Paul knew the importance of the elders and as the elders go so go the rest of the church. If you are an elder here at our church or aspire to be one some day, listen well and build these things into your life. If not, learn from these things as there are principles that apply to you and you can also learn how to better pray for the elders.

In the verses just preceding the ones we read Paul exhorts the elders by showing the things in his life where he did it well. He is not

rambling on aimlessly about himself, but building into the heart and life of these elders and exhorting them to serve the Lord, Paul tells them. Serve the Lord in All humility, with tears with trials and courage. Do not shrink from declaring the whole truth of God which includes repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul talked of principles from his past that he wanted to forge in the elders. Now he talks of his future. Paul's' testimony is an abandonment to God in faithfulness no matter what lies ahead. These radical words of Paul cause the chills of obedience to go up and down my back. It calls for me to shun the American dream and step wildly out of my culture and be utterly abandoned to the cause of Christ. Paul found strength as he discovered a cause much bigger than himself and found that it was worth giving his life to. Have you found anything that's worth giving your life to. Paul was convinced that his faithfulness to God was better....better than even life itself. READ again with me v.24 "But I do not consider my life of any account, if only I could finish my course and ministry that I received from the Lord." Far more important than whether I live comfortably. Far more important than whether I am successful from a human perspective. Faithfulness to my call is far more important than whether or not I live. Faithfulness is better than life.

So if that is true, what does it mean to live this way? If you are going live is a radical abandonment to God living out that faithfulness is better than life, then it means being bound to doing whatever God wants, whenever He wants you to do it. It means that your will is not bound to your own desires, but your will is bound to the Holy Spirit and will of God. Look at v.22 Paul says, "I am bound in spirit. I am on my way to Jerusalem. That word spirit might mean Paul's spirit is a feeling of constraint within him to do God's will. Or it may mean the big S "spirit is driving Paul to Jerusalem. Either way Paul is ultimately moved by the Holy Spirit as one who is under strong conviction to follow God. The point is that Paul's spirit is held captive by the Spirit of God to do the will

of God, no matter what. So if you are believing that faithfulness is better than life, that means being bound by the Spirit to do the will of God. God's spirit has a firm grip on you and the will of God is your passion. That's a challenge to we elders. Am I gripped by the spirit to passionately do God's will no matter what?

The second thing is means to one who believes that faithfulness is better than life is that I can be content even if I do not know all the details of what tomorrow might bring. Most of us like a lot of control. We don't like surprises, even good ones. We want to plan ahead and are frustrated when others force us to flex to their schedules or lack of planning. But Paul found God to be an extremely reliable source on which to place his faith in. V.22 "...not knowing what will happen to me there." When faithfulness is better than life, you don't need to know all about the details of tomorrow.

That can be extremely freeing. If you tend to be a more Eoyer type person, then you could probably come up with about 20 things an hour that might go wrong and make your life miserable. "I might not be able to keep my kid out of trouble. Business is slowing down, I might lose my job. I might lose this big customer, big account. I might not be able to stop my spouse from leaving. My health is leaving, I might not be able to care for myself anymore. I might not be able to win my father to Christ." What is freeing about this text is that God does not require of you to make things work out tomorrow. This doesn't mean we fail to plan and look ahead, it simply means that what God requires of me tomorrow is not human success but simply be faithful to him and let the situations play out as He wills. Stay faithful and trust God. That is very freeing place to be.

That leads to a third thing: if I am going to be recklessly abandoned to following Jesus and believe that faithfulness is better than life, that means then that I will not forsake Christ when my faithfulness means affliction and suffering. V.23 Paul says that there is one thing he

does know about the future and that is “the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city, saying the bonds and afflictions await me.” If you choose to radically join Paul in belief that faithfulness is indeed better than life, it means that you will not only be content not knowing the details of tomorrow, but you can be content knowing full well that tomorrow is going to hurt. Amazing isn't it.

Most of us do all we can to avoid pain. Most of us want to be assured that cost for following Jesus isn't really all that high. Some of us signed up for Jesus hoping for a great deal that we could get all our zits fixed without any pain. Remember when you first came to Christ how excited and enthusiastic you were, then you realized that following Christ is not something you did for just a day, a weekend retreat, a year. Then you got hurt. People disappointed you. People who seemed to be far more spiritual did things that pained. You got blood on your leg, sweat on your forehead. It stopped being fun and became really, really hard.

Why does Paul tell these elders from Ephesus that what awaits him in Jerusalem is bonds and suffering? He's going forward anyway...so he tells them to teach them it doesn't matter. Faithfulness to God is better than physical comfort and protection. If affliction comes it just doesn't matter he is going forward no matter how difficult. No matter whether anyone else comes with him. And the elder ought to go forward in following God's will no matter the hardship, pain and suffering. Paul says; Count on it. There is nothing easy about belief. In this world there will be tribulations. But be of good cheer, be of good cheer for I have overcome the world. So the question remains. Do you believe that faithfulness is better than life? Faithfulness means that you do not forsake Christ when following Jesus means affliction, uncomfortable, inconvenient, not practical. Faithfulness means that when we don't fully understand God we do it anyway. Faithfulness means that when God has said no and we don't understand we don't just go do it anyway. When it may not make business sense we follow God. When it may not make

sense for our dating life, we follow God. When it may not get us the job promotion we are working for...we follow God. When our friends may reject and ignore us. When we know our popularity will suffer. When we must swallow our pride. When we must pour out time and money. When we must look like a dork in the eyes of the world...we will be faithful. Because we believe that faithfulness is better than life itself. If a man or woman never does anything except that which can be easily done, then they will never do anything worth doing at all. If you always run down the hill of least resistance you will never accomplish anything of worth. Determine faithfulness whatever the cost. For it is better than life.

It would have been easy for Paul to head to retirement of ease. Paul your getting old. Wouldn't you like a nice quiet little cottage down on the Mediterranean Sea? You have done more than 10 lifetimes of ministry. Its time to rest. Spend the last 20 years of life traveling, golfing, puttering around in your garage. Give some of these younger bucks a chance. Timothy hes young why don't you let him take over. Don't go to Rome you could get yourself killed.

Faithfulness is better than life. Faithfulness is better than retirement. Faithfulness is better than a large bank account and leisure life. For some of you, your company will eventually tell you to retire. Someday in another 20 years you will probably tell me to retire. Don't think of it as retirement. Webster says to retire is to "withdraw from action or danger, to fall back, to go to bed, to march away from the enemy. Don't retire. Instead think of it as a change of assignment. Think of it as a new front in the warfare. A new assigned position from the king and commander in chief of the universe. There is work to be done for the cause of God's kingdom and as long as I have breathe that is what I want to be about. Paul says, "If God is calling me to Jerusalem...then no matter how difficult, I'm going." Faithfulness to Jesus is far better than a life of comfort.

So why? Why would faithfulness be better than life? Why should I give all my trust in abandon to following Jesus? V.24,25 “ Faithfulness is better than life because if I am faithful it means I am going to finish the race and the one that finishes the race gets the crown. “ Paul says he is willing to give up all his own desire and even life in order to finish the course, the race course set for him by God. There is another place in the Bible where course and faith come together. That verse is found in II Timothy 4:7,8. Paul is at the end of his life. These are some of the very last words he wrote about 6 or 7 years after his meeting here with the elders of Ephesus. He writes to Timothy “ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race (course) I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord will award to me on that Day and not only to me but to all who loved his appearing.”

Faithfulness is better than life because this life is very short and beyond this “all too short” life is a great life of joy and last forever and forever is a very long time. All those who are faithful here will enter that life and receive a crown of righteousness.

II Cor 4:17 “The slight momentary affliction is working for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”

John 12:25 “He who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Matthew 7:13-14 “The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Why is faithfulness better than life? Because faithfulness means finishing the race. Finishing the race means incredible joy forever. We know were on the right track because down in v.35 Paul quotes Jesus words “It is more blessed to give then to receive”. The world says get all you can and you had better hold on tight or someone will rip it from your

arms. If you don't lay up for yourself, now you are going to miss out and you'll never have it.

The word of God says, "your choice. You can lay it up now on earth but when you die it will be gone forever. Or you can live for God now and you will have treasure forever. And it really is true that you can't take worldly wealth into heaven. But if I am faithful, and obedient in serving him here and now, I will finish the course and bask in the joy of the treasures that will be in heaven. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moths and rust destroy, where thieves break in and rip you off. But lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven where nothing can destroy, or deteriorate or diminish in value. Compare with the hope of heaven and eternal weight of glory, the things of this world, the very best things this world has to offer are literally all the refuse of a disintegrating world. My greatest most solid investment is to lay up treasure in heaven. Wouldn't that make a huge difference if we could begin thinking like that?

What is Paul's confidence that faithfulness to God will bring future glory and joy? V.24, 25 Paul lived to testify God's grace and God's kingdom. So the basis of Paul's hope was that God is filled with grace and that God was indeed king. If God is king...and He is. Then He can reward the faithful. Nothing can stop the king moving in his kingly power. If God is also filled with grace, it means that we can take confidence that God not only can reward faithfulness, but that He is face will reward faithfulness. As sure as the Sovereignty and grace of God, faithfulness is better than life. We must let God Word not the world shape our believe and choose that which is ultimately better for our life.

I took my bungee jump in New Zealand in December of 1990, the month I quit my well paying Engineering Management position because I felt like God was calling me into vocational ministry. Packing up my family and heading to Dallas, Texas felt more scary then jumping off the 165 ft. Kawarau bridge. It many months before I felt the bungee cord of

God's provision was strong enough to hold me up. Giving up the secure financially comfortable job was a step of abandoning faithfulness. Erin and I really felt that is what God wanted us to do. And it served to bolster our faith in God and He has never let us down. We figured on being filled with sacrifice and it was...but we have never missed it, never been without. In fact it has been the opposite as God continues to pour out his blessing on us. That being said, none of us knows what tomorrow may bring. It may bring great suffering, great pain and hardship but I know that faithfulness to God is better than all things. Take the plunge. Follow God with all you have.