

CONFRONTING THE INEVITABLE

Today's Text: Acts 21: 1- 26

Extracts:

And finding disciples [in Tyre], we stayed there seven days. *They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem...* When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home... On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. And as we stayed many days, *a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" Now when we heard these things, we ... pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem... [but] when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done"* [Acts 21: 4-14]

In the United States, the law requires you to show proof of citizenship before you can be registered to practise in such professions as law and accountancy. Jose Manuel Godinez-Samperio, 25, was nine years old when he was brought into the country from Mexico by his parents.¹ Over the years, he completed high school, college and law school largely with private financial support. In September 2011, he found out that he had passed the Florida State Bar exam that he had sat for in April 2011. Knowing that he would be required to disclose his immigration status to be registered to practise law, he had to face the inevitable. He went public before a Florida legislative committee to disclose his immigration status which only a few people were aware of before then. In his own words, "I decided to come out with my story... even to the point of risking my liberty."

Sooner than later, we all reach that point in life when we have to confront what we have been running away from for too long. We have lied and dodged. We have displaced and rationalized. Then, one day, we reach the end of the road where there is no room to manoeuvre or hide. At that point, we have to face the inevitable. In this week's Bible story, Paul had avoided or escaped from his Jewish persecutors because he was living abroad, among the Gentiles. Finally, the Holy Spirit asked him to return to Jerusalem to confront the inevitable. There are a few principles that we all can learn from this week's study to assist us to face similar circumstances. Read on!

¹ Story is based on: Miranda Leitsinger, "Can an illegal immigrant become a lawyer?" msnbc.com, April 24, 2012; <http://usnews.msnbc.msn.com/news/2012/04/24/11369925-can-an-illegal-immigrant-become-a-lawyer?lite>

1. Background: Paul confronts the inevitable

In one of his popular novels, Nigeria's renowned writer, Chinua Achebe, tells the story of a widow whose only son had just drowned in the village pond. She felt that her only option was to kill herself by drowning in the same pond. Hefty youths were detailed by the village elders to prevent her from doing so. After several attempts, the youths themselves got tired and decided to leave her to do whatever she chose to do. As she once more ran towards the pond, nobody ran after her. She got there and put one foot in the water and then the other. Nobody stopped her. Then, she turned furiously at the onlookers and said, "Won't you stop me?" She had reached her inevitable point.

Something is said to be inevitable if it must happen and you cannot avoid it or postpone it any longer. The moment has finally arrived. All the gadgets that you have used to delay or avoid it have finally failed or expired. Now, you are on your own and you have to face it ***alone***, whether you like it or not. ***Death is the best example of the inevitable.*** Other examples are the end of an illustrious career or the day a spoilt brat moves out from his doting parents into his own home. ***Have you identified your inevitable moment? What are you going to do about it so that you can turn it into a winning opportunity? Such and more are the questions that we shall attempt to answer in this study.***

This week's Bible story comes from Paul's inevitable moment when the Holy Spirit told him to return to Jerusalem where "chains and tribulations" awaited him [Acts 20: 22-23]. When Paul and his travelling companions came to Caesarea, they were hosted by Philip the evangelist (one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles- Acts 6: 1-5) and his four virgin daughters who were prophetesses [Acts 21: 7-9]. After some days, a certain prophet named Agabus came from Judea. He got hold of Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles'" [vv. 10-11].

Everyone who heard it pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem but he answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die for the name of the Lord Jesus." So, when the people saw that they could not dissuade him, they gave up, saying, "The will of the Lord be done" [vv. 13-14]. ***Paul was ready to confront his inevitable moment alone.***

To enable us to appreciate Paul's bold stand in the face of adversity, we need to background our story by examining certain things about him, as follows:

a) *Paul's personal qualities*

Paul was an extraordinary and complex personality. He called himself "a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, ***a Pharisee***" [Phil. 3: 5].

Born as Saul, a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, he was brought up there at the feet of Gamaliel, a strict Pharisee and doctor of the law. Much more, he was *a Roman citizen* [Acts 20: 39; 22: 3; 16: 37; 5:34].

Paul's profile was intimidating both to his admirers and enemies alike. For example, Peter referred to the writings of "our beloved brother Paul" who speaks in all his epistles of "some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction" [2 Pet. 3: 15-16]. As a Pharisee, Paul was a member of the Jewish elite. As a Roman citizen, he was entitled to due process with the right to appeal to Caesar in Rome! So, *he was an enigma to foes and friends alike.*

b) *Paul's work for Christ*

When Jesus sent Ananias in a vision to Paul on the day he was struck blind while going to Damascus to persecute believers, He told him that *Paul was "a chosen vessel" of His, to bear His name before Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel*, adding, "For I will *show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake*" [Acts 9: 13-16]. Here is a glimpse of what Paul had passed through even before confronting the inevitable trip to Jerusalem [2 Cor. 11: 23-27]:

- He received from the Jews 39 stripes five times!
- He was beaten with rods thrice and stoned once;
- He was shipwrecked thrice;
- In his missionary journeys, he faced perils from robbers, false brethren and Gentiles, among others.

He was privileged to be caught up to Paradise where he heard "inexpressible words" unlawful for a man to utter. To make sure that he did not ever disclose what he was required to keep confidential, he was given a thorn in the flesh to torment him for the rest of his life [2 Cor. 12: 1-9]. Therefore, *Paul was adequately prepared for his work for Christ. He could take pleasure in infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions and distresses for Christ's sake* [v. 10].

c) *Impact of both on his persecutions*

Paul had a thorn in the flesh to always remind him of the power of Christ resting upon him. At the same time, *he was a thorn in the flesh for the Jewish leaders* who found his testimony for Christ a major hindrance to their message of persecution against the early church. In turn, Paul, like His Master, Jesus, was a threat to the Roman emperor whose suzerainty was propped up by pagan and satanic worship. Paul was, therefore, a uniting force for Jews and Gentiles to stop the spread of Christianity beyond the Middle East!

From the foregoing, you can see why Paul’s inevitable moment was critical to all the parties. Even when, on James’ advice, Paul took part in the purification rituals before going into the temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders still seized him and planned to kill him. Fearing a breakdown of law and order, the Roman soldiers intervened and took him into the garrison, to their commander. On learning of his Roman citizenship, they gave him the privilege to speak to the people from the stairs of the garrison [Acts 20: 15-40]. ***By confronting the inevitable, Paul found protection even from the more dangerous enemy, the Romans! The same is your portion when you let God handle it for you.***

2. Lessons for dealing with your “inevitable”

According to an African proverb, the ostrich buries her head in the sand and beats her chest, saying, “No one can see me now!” One day, reality will dawn on her when she realizes that she is the only one that cannot see herself! That is why a person who tries to avoid unpleasant situations by refusing to acknowledge that they exist is called an ostrich!

Most of us behave like the ostrich. For example, we have custody of confidential information about ourselves and what we do, thinking and believing that nobody can break in to open up all the dirty things that we are trying to hide. Yet, none of us likes to be perceived in the public as dishonest, or sexually depraved. We prefer to be seen and treated as paragons of excellence. Some of us use one lie to explain another lie, hoping in the end to be perceived as a person of high integrity. However, one day, sooner than later, the inevitable will strike. That immunity conferred by position or age can easily be stripped by retirement or unauthorized disclosures. When you succeed in knocking off every other competitor by intrigue or corrupt practices, you may soon remain the only dribbler on the pitch and spectators will see you in your true state! Sooner than later, we shall all confront our inevitable moment.

From the foregoing story, we can deal with our inevitable moments as follows:

a) *Stop running because you can’t hide!*

Most of us may be under the mistaken impression that what others do not know about us does not exist. What of what people know about us that we do not know about ourselves? Such may hurt us more than what we are covering up. In the end, we can only run but cannot hide for, as the word of God says, “Be sure your sin will find you out” [Num. 32: 23]. David and Bathsheba were able to use Israel’s security system to hide their adulterous affairs from people but God used the prophet Nathan to uncover the king’s nakedness. More painfully, God said to David, “For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing [adversity against David from his own house] before all Israel, before the sun” [2 Sam. 12; 10-12].

Your inevitable moment may be in connection with your calling to do God's work. For one reason or the other, you have refused or postponed the decision. One day, you will find yourself with no other choice but to finally accept or reject it. For example, God called Jonah to go and preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. Instead of going east to Nineveh, Jonah bought a one-way ticket to travel west to Joppa, on the way to Tarshish. Following a storm provoked by the LORD, Jonah was tossed into the sea where a fish swallowed him and brought him ashore close to his original departure point in Israel. As soon as he heard the word of God a second time, we are told, "Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, **according to the word of the LORD**" [Jon. 3: 1-3]! That was an inevitable moment for him.

b) *Know God's position on your case!*

Your inevitable situation may have to do with God's plan for your life. It may have to do, for example, with your career or marriage or calling. The word of God says that we walk by faith, not by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7]. ***Faith means that God will show you in advance what to expect in the future*** [Heb. 11: 1]. God knows the end from the beginning. So, He can communicate faith to you ***in dreams, visions or prophecy*** [Joel 2: 28-29]. For example, the birth of the Messiah through a virgin was prophesied through Isaiah many centuries before it actually happened [Is. 7: 14]. So, when archangel Gabriel appeared before virgin Mary to announce the great news, she accepted her inevitable moment by saying, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" [Lk 1: 26-38].

Sometimes, God may not speak to you as copiously or as obviously as that. Nevertheless, He has spoken in that "there are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the LORD's counsel- that will stand" [Prov. 19: 21]. Therefore, that "luck" or "coincidence" or even "disappointment" may be the Lord's sign to you that your inevitable moment has come. For example, I know of somebody who, in August 1979, was denied promotion to a Senior Lecturer position in a Nigerian university, even when he was reportedly the most qualified candidate. A few weeks later, he responded to an advertisement in the private sector. He took up the new job on 1st April 1980 and his starting salary (following a national general wage review with effect from that date) came to double the bar of the Senior Lecturer salary scale that would have taken him over ten years to reach! That private sector job was what launched him into several international job and consulting opportunities that have enabled him to visit over 45 countries around the world! Therefore, seek to know God's position on your life so that you can confront the inevitable when it comes.

c) *The best place to confront the inevitable is in the open!*

A popular saying is that the best place to hide is in the open. That means ***transparency, integrity and righteousness in everything that you do or think about.*** The word of God says, “The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry [but] the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth” [Ps. 34: 15-16]. When you walk in the light of God’s presence, you can confront your inevitable, good or bad, pleasant or painful, because you know where you are going.

3. Conclusion: Can you face the judgment seat of Christ?

As Jesus approached His Passion, He took His disciples with Him to the Mount of Olives. His inevitable moment had arrived. Being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. We are told, “His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” He knelt down and prayed to His Father, saying, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done” [Lk 22: 39-44]. Jesus confronted the inevitable and died on the cross for our sins. Therefore, we have a High Priest who can sympathise with our weaknesses. So, come boldly to His throne of grace to obtain mercy and find grace to help you in time of need [Heb. 4: 15-16].

You will need such grace when you confront your last inevitable moment; when you face judgment after death “for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” [2 Cor. 5: 10].

Are you ready?