

Week Seven

Conversations with God

ACTS 13–20

READ

Maybe one of the more important but commonly unrecognized realities in life is the reality of expectations. We expect something to be one way, but it turns out to be another. The way it turned out may or may not be inherently wrong, but it feels wrong because our expectations are unmet. The newlyweds have expectations. The college student has expectations. The new hire has expectations. Like it or not, we carry expectations into most any situation, and those expectations serve as a benchmark for satisfaction.

Christ is at work and invites our participation. Throughout this experience you have discovered more of what this means, and like it or not, expectations begin to form. What would it look like and feel like to be more fully engaged in the work of Christ? What would it be like to more actively use the gifts God has given, to invest more time and energy, to really go for it? There's something about the invitation to participate that appeals to us deeply. We want to be part of the work God is doing. We want to do what God has created us to do, but will our expectations be met? Will we experience the life we hope to experience?

The remainder of Acts chronicles the ministry and travels of Paul. Without question, his story gives cause for pause. Did Paul's participation in the body of Christ bring fulfillment? Did his life get better because he found his calling? What was it like for Paul to fully and passionately engage the body of Christ? As you'll read this week, when Paul decided to become an active participant in the body of Christ, his life took a dramatic turn. To the surprise of many, though, from a certain vantage point, this would not be a turn for the better but for the worse.

In one of his letters, Paul describes his high standing in the Jewish community prior to following Christ...

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. (Philippians 3:4-6)

Translation: Paul's life was a great success. He enjoyed great favor, authority, comfort, and a flawless reputation. That was the life of Paul *before* he chose to follow Christ. As part of his newfound life in Christ, however, coupled with his calling to take the gospel to the Gentiles, we read this...

I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. (Acts 9:16)

As you will read in the remainder of Acts, Paul does indeed suffer greatly to advance the kingdom. In Paul's own words:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three

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times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Corinthians 11:23-27)

Paul went from a life of success, comfort, favor, and authority to a life of hardship, struggle, ridicule, and persecution, and all because he chose to co-labor with Christ for the kingdom. One wonders if Paul might have felt cheated by Christ, as though he were hoodwinked into joining the cause, only later to discover the intense realities of all this new life would entail. Paul is not silent on this subject. In the same letter quoted earlier, where Paul describes the great successes of his former life, Paul pens the following:

Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings. (Philippians 3:7-11)

So when comparing the life he lived before and after his commitment to Christ, Paul considers his former life to be “rubbish,” worth nothing compared to his new life. Even more, Paul describes this new life as deeply satisfying because he gained Christ. If, to you, the satisfaction that comes from success, recognition, and comfort outweighs that which comes from being an active participant in Christ’s body, then perhaps you’ve overlooked the immense satisfaction that comes from growing intimacy with Christ. It is the Spirit of Christ who floods the soul, and one can hardly experience his Spirit more than in laboring alongside him in the restoration work of the kingdom. In your conversations with God this week, ask Christ to reveal to you the depth of satisfaction found in being the body, despite the accompanying hardships and challenges.

MEMORIZE

This week’s memory verses:

1 John 3:16-18 *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”*

1 Peter 3:15 *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”*

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MEDITATE

Meditating is simply talking and listening to God. Your conversation with God will be inspired and informed by reading and memorizing Scripture, but your conversation should also be personalized. Carefully consider the passages, but don't *just* consider the passage. Talk and listen. Pour out your thoughts, concerns, frustrations, and joys. Or just sit in silence before God. Some talk best with God in a quiet room. Others prefer to talk with God while running or walking. Most importantly, engage God in a way that is authentic and personal.

Use the space below to record memorable thoughts or highlights from your Conversations with God to share with your Small Group or Running Partners.



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