

Happy Mother's Day! What a blessing the godly women of this church are to us!

Story: A mentor of mine many years ago. Happily married, successful businessman. Lost his wife to cancer. Remarried, moved here. Mentored me and others. Jesus was the joy of his life. I watched his life as his Business went under. Pain but still joy. Then he got cancer. In the hospital and the cancer had taken his sight. I sat with him and read a chapter that he had made me memorize. Isaiah 53 (prophesy about Jesus) v.5:

⁵ *But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.*

He sat up straight in bed and with an enormous smile and tears streaming out of his blind eyes, he shouted out "Yes, oh thank you Jesus!"
I remember driving away from that last time I would ever see him and praying to God, "Lord, just let me make it through this life and at the end be as joyful as him in my death because of you"

How can someone who has had and lost so much be so joyful? From watching his life, I believe the answer is because the "stuff" was never what his joy was in. If my joy is not deposited in the "bank" of material treasure, comfort and "my life the way I want it", then when that bank goes under, in reality I lose nothing!

Jim Elliot, the martyred missionary said it so much more eloquently. A quote many of us have likely heard many times but is worth repeating at least one more time:
"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

My hope, this morning, is to do my part in building you up and leading you to be this kind of people, because you believe and live this truth:

God's unshakable character and sovereignty are the foundation of our eternal peace and joy.

This is one of the main realities we see in the life of Paul in these final chapters of Acts:

Lead Up

1. Paul's assignment from God has put him in a decades long furnace of suffering
2. He has been opposed at every turn, beaten (multiple), falsely accused, arrested, unjustly imprisoned, target of at least 2 assassination plots, held for years in prison as a political pawn, all the while being squeezed for money. Denied a fair trial to the point that his only option to obey Jesus' command to "go to Rome" is to jump into the lion's mouth by appealing to be tried before Caesar.
3. Now he's been placed on a ship headed fro Rome and if all that pain and suffering wasn't enough, they've hit a storm and everyone is in danger of death. Near an island called Malta, the ship hits a reef and Paul and all the others must swim to shore, likely in the middle of November, in the freezing cold waters.
4. Finally, he's back safe on land and if you have any kind of heart, you're saying, "Ok, Paul has been through enough. He doesn't need to suffer any more."

Acts 28:1-4

¹ After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. ² The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. ³ When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper (poisonous snake) came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand.

1. Have you ever just had it? The straw that broke the camel's back?
 1. It's not that the thing in itself is enough to emotionally crash you... it's that it was added to a pile of things and it just feels like insult to injury?
2. Not too long ago, I had had one of the hardest days I'd had in a long time.
 1. My family life had been very busy and requiring hard work and sacrifice.
 2. My ministry here had been especially heavy... felt like I was being pulled in every direction and that my whole life was consumed by putting out fires and meeting needs, all the while exhausted.
3. I finally got home from work (after a 12-hour day), finally laid down in bed, exhausted and disheartened... just wanting to crawl in a cave and not come out for a few weeks. And just as I'm starting to take a deep breath and let it all go, the texts begin: more questions, more problems, more needs.
 1. Took care of all of those needs and then set my phone down thinking it was over. And then that dreaded text sound hit one more time.
 2. Out of complete reflex, I grabbed the phone and chucked it across the floor.
 3. Such an immature moment... that my daughter, Mae, was so "fortunate" to witness b/c she happened to walk in the room at that moment.
4. I had just had it. (If you're wondering, my phone is fine... thanks Mous case!)
5. I tell that whole story just to say, I feel like I wouldn't blame Paul for being in that same fragile, "Done with the world" place as I was... only he had VALID reasons to feel that way!
6. All that he'd been through and now HE'S the one who makes friends with a snake.
7. But what we don't see is Paul reacting in anger, resentment or self-pity. Rather, he seems unmoved, calm and ready to keep going.
8. **Paul was unmoved because his joy in life was anchored, not in getting what he wanted but in being a part of what God was doing.**
 1. You see Jesus had appeared to Paul and told him "You're going to Rome."
 2. "If Jesus says I'm going to Rome, I'm going to Rome. No shipwreck or snake can thwart the will of God... and the will of God IS WHAT I WANT MOST"
9. The islanders were expecting quite a different result though And to add insult to injury, look at the response of the people who saw this:

⁴ When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, *Justice* has not allowed him to live."

1. Their response is pretty much, "Wow, he must have deserved this."
2. Part of the superstitions of Greek religion in that day was that shipwreck was a way of the gods punishing the guilty. The Greek goddess named "Dikei" (Justice) was giving you what you deserved
3. The local islanders, though, see that Paul has escaped a shipwreck with his life, and so if the goddess of Justice couldn't get him at sea, she'd get him on shore. "He narrowly escaped his punishment at sea, but she still didn't let him get away with whatever he's done!"
 1. Or as my daughter Ellie would eloquently say, "That's what you get!"

Acts 28:5-6

⁵ He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶ They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

1. So now, the rationale is "He made it through a shipwreck, only to be bitten by a poisonous snake without any real injury...He's not ESCAPING the goddess of Justice, he IS a god!
2. It's so incredible how God is able to transform our pain and misfortune into an opportunity to step into the joy of joining Him on His mission:

Acts 28:7-10

⁷ Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. ⁸ It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. ⁹ And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. ¹⁰ They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

1. It seems pretty clear that this snakebite incident put Paul in a favorable contact with an important man on the island.
2. This man, Publius, has a sick father. Paul prays for him and then heals him.
 1. Interesting... this is the only record in Acts of Paul healing someone through prayer. All the other healings Paul does are recorded as Paul pronouncing healing for people.
 2. But in this moment, where Paul is being hailed as a god, he shows he is NOT a god by *asking* God to heal this man.
 3. Paul isn't about to let this act of kindness convince the islanders even more that he is a god.

Acts 28:11-16

¹¹ After three months (probably February now) we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead.

1. I think this is a little jab that Luke throws in against the false gods of Greek religion
2. The twin gods are Castor and Pollux, patron gods of navigators who make up the constellation of Gemini.
 1. Their job was to protect people at Sea. And so, they were often carved into the bow of sailing vessels.
3. It kind of feels like Luke adds this detail with a wink and a nod to say, "You guys are a little late to the party... where were you on the last voyage!?!?"
4. These false gods of Greece and the false gods of our culture (Money, Fame, Power), none of these have power to save. Only the one true God does, and His Son, Jesus!
5. And so now we see Paul's final trek to Rome:

¹² Putting in at Syracuse (city on East bank of Sicily), we stayed there for three days. ¹³ And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium (city on Western tip of the toe on Italy's "boot"). And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli (right next to modern Naples). ¹⁴ There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so, we came to Rome (they are now traveling by land the rest of the way to Rome) ¹⁵ And the brothers there (at Rome), when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us.

1. So, Christians living in Rome hear that Paul is coming and 2 different groups set out at different times to meet him as a welcoming party on the way... one group meets him 40 miles away and the other 30 miles away.

On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage (What kind of welcome would Paul get as a prisoner? Would the brothers and sisters in Rome be ashamed of him in this honor-shame culture? No, they travel a far way to greet him). ¹⁶ And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

1. So, when Paul arrives in Rome, he's kept under light custody in his own rented apartment with a rotation of Roman soldiers guarding him one at a time.
2. Paul reflects on this exact situation in his letter to the Philippians:

Philippians 1:12-14

12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

1. What we see in Paul is the power of a radically non-self centered life.
 1. Paul wasn't the point of Paul's life... Jesus was.
2. And though we surely see Paul struggle with the pain and opposition through the book of Acts, we don't see him give up or lose his joy.
3. If you're like me, peace and joy are not natural.
 1. For me, peace and joy incredibly elusive
4. What I have found is that the joy and peace cannot be attained by seeking them directly... by working to set your life up with comfort, enjoyment and avoiding pain.
 1. Joy and peace are only found when you seek the AUTHOR of joy and peace.
5. **Paul was seeking intimacy and obedience to Jesus AND IN DOING SO, seeking his own joy.**
 1. When I want Jesus more than anything else... when I seek intimacy with Jesus and obedience to my King... Jesus Himself, and the mission He invites us into is where the joy is found.
 2. And I want to encourage your heart with an exhortation:
6. **The only thing keeping you from the incalculable joy of God's mission for you as a disciple-maker: living for self.**
 1. When you live for yourself, ignoring Jesus' invitation to draw close to Him and to make disciples because it isn't comfortable or requires sacrifice... when you live for yourself in this way, the reality is that you are not bringing yourself joy.
 2. You are trading extreme joy for small and diminishing satisfaction.
 3. In the long-run, the pursuit of SELF is the pursuit of MISERY.
 4. Do you want actual joy? Lasting joy? Peace that is completely out of proportion to the hardships you're in?
 5. Then draw close to Jesus, and follow Him into His mission of love for people, making disciples and teaching them to obey all that Jesus has commanded.
 6. It's not that the hardships won't be hard any more. It's not that pain won't be painful.
 1. It's just that if the easy life and comfort are not where you store your joy, then your joy can't be stolen when easiness and comfort are stolen from you.
7. And you will find, at the center of your life, something... Someone, who truly satisfies.

If Jesus Christ is at the center of my life I will faithfully endure the *momentary* pain and sacrifice in anticipation of the reward of *unending* joy.

1. One way we pursue joy in Jesus is by coming together as a family to pray and worship together.
 1. We're doing that THIS Thursday at 6:30 in the Pavilion. Our team will be leading the family to draw near to God.
2. And then next Sunday, May 19, is One Big Service at 9am. Afterward we'll spend time together out in the Park and have some cake, celebrating all of the students who are graduating this time of year!
3. Camps are coming! In June, we have camps for kids ages 3.5 all the way up through High School.
 1. Sign up online or swing by The Welcome Center today after service.

Invite for Prayer