

Introduction

If you've ever gone on a trip with a child, you're all familiar with that one question they keep asking over and over. "Are we there yet?" For several weeks we've been studying Paul's lengthy journey to Rome. And you're probably wondering, "Are we there yet?" It might seem like it's taking us longer to study about it than it did for Paul to make the trip, but I promise, Lord willing, next week we're going to see Paul safely to Rome and we're going to finish the book of Acts.

In our last study, we saw God's kindness to Paul even in the midst of a furious storm and shipwreck. This morning I want to continue that theme. I'd like to title our message, Unusual Kindness. And here's what we're going to see.... God often shows us kindness in the most unexpected and unusual ways.

1. God shows kindness through strangers

You remember that Paul and the other 275 men had been battered by a hurricane force storm for at least two weeks. When they finally saw land, they attempted to run the ship aground but got caught on a reef. They were forced to abandon ship and swim for shore because the waves were ripping the ship to shreds. So here these men are. They swim onto the shore in freezing water and the storm was still raging. So you have to imagine being wet in low winter temperatures and the wind howling mercilessly. Many of the men must have been suffering from hypothermia. They were physically and emotionally exhausted. They were weak because they hadn't eaten much over the past two weeks. They've landed on an island and they have no idea where they are. If it had been a deserted island most or all of them would have died. Or if they had landed on an island where the inhabitants were unfriendly, they may have been killed or enslaved.

But in God's goodness, they've landed in a place where the native people show Paul and his companions, the texts says, "unusual kindness." They waste no time in kindling a fire and welcoming these men. And this kindness comes a critical moment. Look how weak and vulnerable these men must have been. They were defenseless. They had no strength. They didn't have any money to offer or goods to trade with their hosts. They were at their mercy. But through these strangers, God shows Paul and these other men great kindness.

You and I are very wary of strangers. In fact we come up with terms like "stranger-danger" to teach our kids not to trust people they don't know. And we're like that aren't we? We're very hesitant to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and open with people when we don't know if they're safe.

Here's the thing, God has always had a special place in his heart for the outsider, for the traveler, for the stranger.

Leviticus 19:33-34 "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. 34 You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Let's play that in reverse to see the logic of it

I am the LORD your God

You have been a stranger

Therefore love the stranger by treating them like they belong.

One of the great ways God unexpectedly shows his love to people is by doing it through strangers.

So, who are the strangers in our day and how can we show them the kindness of Christ? Now, what always comes up at this point is do we give money to the people who make a living by begging for money outside of Walmart. It's very easy for us to excuse ourselves from obeying God by focusing on the sins of a small number of people.

So let's ask the question. Who are the hurting among us? Who are the vulnerable? The marginalized? The suffering. Where do we look around and see people who are experiencing a storm in their life and the poor little boat they had has been smashed to smithereens? Right now there are people around us who are going through a divorce. Right now someone you know has lost a loved one. Someone else has made a mess of their finances and doesn't know what to do. Right now some of our relatives are destroying their lives with drugs and alcohol.

There are people in this room today who are struggling under the weight of life and are about to crumble under what they're going through.

Let me remind you of

Galatians 6:10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

What Galatians is saying is that as believers we're called to do good to all people. But we have a special responsibility to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ. While, yes, we are called to care for the stranger, we have a special calling on our lives to bear one another's burdens. Now, we don't use that truth as an excuse not to help those outside our walls. But I do think it's right to believe that if we're not loving one another well, then why in the world would God give us the privilege of loving others?

What is it that might keep us from showing kindness to strangers. Well, there might be many reasons, but deep down I think we all know that to really show authentic compassion and kindness to those in need, it's going to cost us. And we're really afraid that getting involved in other people's messes is going to leave us messy. Reaching out is going to cost us valuable time and emotional energy. Deep down we're afraid we can't afford to spend so much loving others.

But let me tell you something. You can afford it. Do you know how I know you can? Because Jesus spared no expense investing himself in your mess. When we were battered by our sins, defenseless, weak, hopeless, without money, Jesus came and invested all of himself in order to welcome us in and warm us in his love.

So God shows his love unexpectedly through strangers. Sometimes we are on the receiving end of that love and sometimes we are blessed to be on the giving end.

But let's look at another unexpected way that God shows us unusual kindness.

2. God shows us kindness through our trials

Now I admit, at first this one is a little like taking some really nasty medicine. But when we're able to stand back and see this through the eyes of God's wisdom, this will be one of the most beautiful, comforting, and encouraging truths God has given us.

Look again at these men on the beach. They've started a fire and Paul is gathering wood when he's bitten by a viper, a poisonous snake. When the native people saw it I want you to see what they assumed. Look at v.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 the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.

Here's a huge mistake they made that we need to be really careful not to make. Just because something bad happens to someone doesn't mean they're guilty of something. It is absolutely unbiblical to think that as long as we are in the will of God, then everything is going to go well for us. Paul is dead center in the will of God and he still experiences the full force of a horrible storm and now this snake bite.

John 16:33 In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

I think it says something about the heart of a person who just assumes that when people are struggling through something, it is because of their sin. The heart that assumes that about others reveals a kind of proud, self-righteous spirit. I'm ashamed to admit that I've felt and acted this way before. When I was a younger father and my children were small and I saw other families whose children were unruly or wandered away from the faith, inside I would congratulate myself that I was the kind of parent

who was a the perfect Christian father. Several years down the road... and friends, all I can tell you is that God has a very powerful and distinct way of humbling proud Christians.

Sometimes I think it takes a lot of the Spirit's work in our lives before we really have the ability to look at others with compassion and understanding.

But look at this. Paul didn't die did he? The natives are just waiting for him to fall down dead and after a while they were shocked to see that Paul was fine. The text says that they changed their minds and went from thinking he was a murderer to thinking he was a god. Now, there's a lesson there too but that'll have to be for another day.

Because Paul didn't die from the snake's bite, he was introduced to the Chief Man of the island named Publius. And we're told that Publius received Paul and entertained him hospitably for three days. And while Paul was there he discovered that Publius' dad was sick with fever and dysentery. Scholars think this was probably "Malta fever" which was a bacterial stomach infection and fever that could last for months. It wasn't usually fatal but was normally accompanied with serious bouts of depression that often left infected people feeling suicidal. So Paul heals Publius' dad and that leads to all of the sick and diseased people of the island being brought to Paul and being healed.

And no doubt, if we take the pattern of the entire book of Acts, we know that God used the miracles to open the door for the gospel to be heard. So through Paul, God shows incredible kindness to the islanders by healing them and allowing them to hear the gospel.

Now let's take a moment and think about this.

If Paul had never been falsely accused and arrested, he wouldn't have been taken as a prisoner to Rome.

If he had never been taken as a prisoner to Rome

He never would have experienced the storm and the shipwreck

If he never experienced the shipwreck he never would have been bitten by the snake

If he had never been bitten by the snake then he'd never had an opportunity to heal these many people and share the gospel with them.

The lesson here is that God often shows people kindness, not merely in spite of our sufferings, but through them. Often it's specifically through our sufferings that God brings the greatest blessings to us and to the people around us.

I want to show you how God uses our suffering to bless people around us and how he uses it to bless us.

First the people around us. Look at

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,
4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Do you see that? There's something about you walking through difficulty, sometimes walking through intense pain, and Christ proving himself faithful to you and walking with you, that makes you and incredibly powerful witness to others who come after you and go through what you've been through.

So, in any given circumstance, God may be doing a million things through the trials he's leading you through. But one thing you can be sure he's doing is preparing you to one day be a blessing to others.

But I also want you to see how God directly blesses us through the things we suffer. Look at

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Paul says something profound here. He says that our afflictions themselves, which by comparison are light and momentary... our afflictions themselves are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Some how God is using our present sufferings to create in us greater capacity for eternal joy. Don't ask me how to explain this... We have to accept it by faith. Somehow our future with Christ will be better, more glorious precisely because of the things which we've suffered in this life.

Now, just a couple of practical points here:

1. When our friends and loved ones are in the middle of experiencing trials, it's not a theology lesson they need. What they really need is our love. When you just survived a shipwreck in freezing water, what you need most is not a seminary class. What you need most is for someone to come and build a fire and wrap their arms around you to warm you up. Sometimes what people need from us is not words but just to come and sit beside them and cry with them. These beautiful truths are helpful to prepare us to suffer well as Christians and to help us interpret our sufferings.

2. Something I've learned about myself is that it's one thing for me to help someone else understand their trials, but it's something altogether different for me to understand my own trials. Even though I'm a pastor, and even though I can turn to all the Scriptures and give a good defense of these beautiful truths, when difficult times land on my own doorstep, it can be very difficult for me to keep my bearings. I can counsel someone else with poise but it's hard for me not to struggle with doubts and fears. Can I tell you something... That's ok. Even when we struggle to trust his goodness, he's not up there tapping his foot saying, when are these dumb people ever going to learn. He's compassionate and patient toward us in our doubts and fears.

Psalms 103:13-14 As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.

14 For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

Conclusion

So we've seen this morning that God shows us unusual kindness in the most unexpected ways. He shows us kindness sometimes through strangers. And he shows us kindness in our trials, by using us to comfort others and using our trials to make our joy more full in the future.

Ultimately the greatest example of God showing his love and bringing blessing through suffering is through the suffering of his son Jesus on the cross. At the cross, Jesus simultaneously endured the greatest suffering know to man and through it brought the greatest blessing to the greatest number of people in all of history. The cross gives us hope that our suffering is not random or meaningless. It gives us hope that through it, God not only can, but will use it ultimately for blessing us, and those around us.

This morning, if you're here and you're struggling under a trial, I want you to know that you don't have to suffer alone. God has brought you here as a sign of his blessing to tell you that you have a spiritual family that loves you and wants to share the love of the Savior with you