



2022 Weekly Devotions

Week of: October 17th - 23rd

Sermon: October 16th



October 17

2 Corinthians 4:8-10

When I pause to think about all of the suffering in Paul's life and the way he handled it, I am encouraged to hold tight to the rope of faith and never to let go. The key to studying the life of Paul is to discover what lay beneath the surface that gave him such strength, endurance, and perseverance in the face of constant persecution. He said it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." I don't know about you, but the words afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down are not the ones I want associated with my day to day living.

Please do not downplay those words and gloss them over as if he said he had a small splinter in his hand. Folks, these are words that could create great doubt, turmoil, and angst in your heart and mind. These are circumstances that could wreck your faith and destroy your walk with Jesus. These are words related to situations that could easily cause a person to give up on Christianity and turn back to the world. These are realities that can break a person. But they did not break Paul. I for one want to know the power that holds a man in those circumstances. I want to know the Person who strengthens a man in times of great struggle.

You see, in each of those descriptions of hardship that Paul described, he ended each statement with a word of victory. Afflicted was followed by "but not crushed." They were perplexed but we read they were not "despairing." While they were persecuted and struck down, they were neither "forsaken" nor "destroyed." If you want to read a bit more about the struggles of Paul's life due to his ministry, read 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. There you will read a list of the beatings, imprisonments, and overall tribulations that he faced. Friends, this man's life was not easy and yet through it all he maintained a strong and confident faith in Jesus Christ and the work to which he was called. The question that we should ask is how did he do this or what did he know that gave him the ability to hold on?

Please know that strength like his did not well up in his soul overnight. This type of faith is grown in a person's being over time, through many experiences of exercising faith, and by beholding the very face of Jesus Christ from one step to the next. I believe that strength for the hard times comes from knowing God intimately. The Psalmist described it this way in the 46th Psalm. He wrote, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change..." (v.1-2). He went on to write, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God" (v.4). You see brothers and sisters, the strength for the disappointments and scary parts of this life is found in God alone.

He is our refuge. This means that we run into Him and there we will find strength. I heard it once described like a hand in a glove. Without the hand in the glove, the glove is just a limp piece of material that is powerless to do anything. When the hand slips into the glove, all of a sudden, it is filled and useful for all sorts of work. The hand is the Spirit of God indwelling your life with power that you would otherwise never have. He is the one who strengthens us. Dear ones, I want you to know that when you run to Jesus as your refuge, you will find strength and peace in the "bunker." Notice that in the refuge, God is described as a river which signifies provision and life. He will not me moved so we won't be either as long as we are in Christ. In Him, our refuge, we find all that we saw in Paul's life that allowed him to sing even while in a jail cell. This is not a fairy tale church family. This is how one learns to live the victorious Christian life.

October 18

Psalm 46

I touched on the 46th Psalm in yesterday's point to ponder which made me want to write more on that amazing Psalm and necessary truth for our lives today. Folks, there is no doubt that we are living in times of great uncertainty and turmoil. We all understand why so many people are full of anxiety and anti-depressant use is at an all time high. One article I looked at was entitled, "Astounding Increase in Antidepressant Use among Americans." I believe this is such a sad, and for the most part, unnecessary reality for so many. Even among those who are Christians, it appears that many find their "means to cope" not in Jesus but in worldly ways. The problem that all would ultimately admit is that worldly means do not actually solve the problems. So, join me today as we take a closer look at Psalm 46 and God's answer for the woes and worries of our day.

Sometimes when you think of a refuge, you might think of a shelter like a bunker where everyone inside is hunkered down in survival mode. But that is not the picture that is painted in Psalm 46 of the refuge that God is for us. Take a look at verses 4-5 where we see that in this refuge, "there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God...God is in the midst of her." A river in the Scriptures is most often a metaphor for provision, plenty, and health; Think of Psalm 1 as an example. The picture that we are to see is one of peace, joy, and thriving. We are not to go into hiding with our heads down, rather we are to live in an atmosphere of victory, hope, and advancement.

Another very interesting truth about the refuge that is our God is found in verses 8-9. This could be easily missed so look closely. The Psalmist writes that "the Lord has wrought desolations in the earth." Now, that sounds bad, doesn't it? The truth however is that if you keep reading you will see that what He has destroyed is wars on earth. He has broken the bows and cut the spears in two and he burns the chariots of war with fire. In other words, the very things on earth that have been used to destroy people, God's people, are themselves destroyed by God. So, in the refuge that is our God, weapons of war used against us are destroyed. So, what are we to do?

Dear ones, we are instructed in verse 10 to cease striving and to know that He is God! All the running to worldly things to find some sense of peace or security is futile in the end. The idea that there is enough money, health, fame, or accomplishments in this world to provide a deep sense of security is foolish. I believe that deep down inside all of us, we know those things remain out of reach in our own strength and effort. Solomon was correct when, after endless pursuits of internal peace and fulfillment without financial limitations and access to resources, he determined all of it is vanity (Ecclesiastes 2:23).

Church family, the peace and strength that I write about today based on the 46th Psalm is not a pipe dream. There is a place on this earth where we can reside in confidence with strength and joy. That place is in Christ. I want you to notice that the Psalmist does not write this with his head stuck in the sand. He is fully aware that there are great and grave dangers in this world. His point is that even if the earth were shaken and the mountains slip into the sea, these truths about God as our refuge and our strength remain true. Even as the nations make an uproar and the pressures against God's people increase, He is now and will always be our safe place. The best thing any of us could do is to lay down our arms and our own strengths at the feet of Jesus. Understand that it is in our weakness that we will find this strength. It is a humbling admission that we need more of Jesus and less of self.

October 19

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10; Mark 6:7

In our text from Sunday's sermon, Luke writes that it was Paul and Silas bound by the stocks in a prison cell. Think for a moment of how wonderful it was to have a companion rather than being in that place all alone. As pastor of Smyrna Baptist for the past twenty-one years, I can honestly say to you that the best years of my ministry have been the last 8 years with Pastor Aaron as my partner in this service. His companionship and partnership have encouraged me, challenged me, strengthened me, and literally carried me along at times. Together we are able to enjoy the victories and accomplishment more fully and we are able to share the burden and lighten each other's struggles at times. I will never be able to express the value of "others" in yoke together.

We can all assume that Paul found strength and conviction from Silas and Silas from Paul. The reason they sang is likely because they reminded each other of the blessings and grace of walking with Christ. When one got discouraged, tired, or even scared, I can imagine the other stating the facts about who Jesus is and all of the promises that they could stand on even in prison. They probably told stories of deliverance, mercy, and grace that carried them on the wings of His goodness and presence. I am sure they reminded each other of His presence in that cell like He was with Daniel and others. If they had been alone, I believe the Devil's access to their thoughts would have been far greater. God knew what He was doing when He sent His disciples out two by two.

Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs because He was emphasizing the power of shared ministry, and the added impact when two or more people work together toward a shared goal. This co-laboring is not only effective but is also reflective of the theological nature of ministry in the era of the New Testament and our day too. By sending his disciples out two by two, Jesus foreshadowed the communal nature that would become the hallmark of the Spirit-filled church. We were never meant to do the Christian life alone. The task is too monumental and the adversary too great to face either without brothers and sisters to uphold, strengthen, and encourage one another. Solomon knew what he was talking about in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 where he said, "Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up." Sharing the blessings and the battles is God's game plan.

Part of the reason that some have fallen away from the church is that they isolated themselves and attempted to do alone what was intended for group work. I had a brief encounter with a man this morning who was complaining that he did not know what was going on in the life of the church. I asked him if he was coming to church, and he said no but that did not seem to matter to him because in his mind we were responsible for keeping him up to date. I asked him, "What do you think the church is here to do?" He mentioned that we were to be about reaching the lost. Well, the truth dear ones is that is part of the purpose of the church but there is more. I would argue that a major emphasis of the church is to gather together as the body of Christ to encourage, strengthen, and exhort one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24-25). You see, evangelism should flow from what happens as the people of God gather to worship and fellowship.

I thank God for all of you who take the time on a regular basis to share life together with the rest of us. From many of you, I gain the umph to keep going when I do not feel like it. From many of you, I gain the courage to face the difficulties with hope and confidence. From many of you, my faith is emboldened by your ministry to me. Thanks and God bless dear family.

October 20

1 Peter 3:15

There is a phrase in our passage from Sunday that must not be overlooked. At the end of Acts 16:25 it says, "...and the prisoners were listening to them." Folks that is an absolutely vital piece to our evangelistic effectiveness. Paul and Silas were in an awful situation, having been arrested, flogged, and now shackled in a prison cell. If ever they were going to break and react in an ungodly manner – this was it. Most people would understand if they kind of "lost it." Of course, we know that is not what happened as they fought for their faith and demonstrated what it looks like to live in light of the promises of Scripture. The words on the pages were more than ink to paper. It is clear that these men truly believed God and reacted with an eye on the Kingdom.

Now, the passage that I want us to focus on today is from 1 Peter 3:15. It says, "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense (or give a reason) to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." We often read that verse and take from it the need to be ready to tell others about Jesus when the opportunity arises. That is certainly true, but it begs another question. Why would a person *ask* in the first place why we as believers have this hope.

Keep in mind that the context is most likely a difficult or trying situation. It is in the midst of pressure that one person sees something in another that prompts the question, "Why are you acting this way?" What they must be seeing is a peace, a strength, or a calmness that causes them to want to know how you can behave that way in that situation because they know they could not. Paul and Silas acted in a way totally contrary to what would be expected from prisoners. The other inmates would have understood if they were cursing, crying, or railing against some outside entity. But the singing, the praying, the calmness, and dare I say the joy was puzzling. As the other prisoners looked on, they witnessed a genuine faith that drew them to the source.

Brothers and sisters, this is what Peter is writing about in his epistle. It is true that we are to be ready to tell others about Jesus, but it is equally true that we should conduct ourselves in such a way that they want to ask us what makes us different. Ponder today what your life would need to look like to cause people to ask questions about your beliefs and strength that allow you to handle circumstances unlike most people. It is in community that we "walk out" our faith. This is why it is of the utmost importance that we have a living faith out in the real world. It is what we do at the ball field, the workplace, the swimming pool, or the grocery store that draws people into conversations that can lead to Christ.

I know there are stories of knocking on random doors (I've done it myself) or handing out tracks where God seems to have moved, but folks you have got to understand that is not the model Jesus demonstrated in the Scriptures. It was, and still is, all about building relationships and living out your faith in real time so that people will be drawn to ask you why. They will want to know why you live and love, serve and sacrifice the way you do. It is then that you can tell them all about the Jesus that they see in you. I am reminded of the many times that the early disciples told others to "come and see." There is something special and effective about putting flesh on our faith and action to our words. That can only happen in real life, with real people, in real relationships. Is anyone asking you why you handle the pressures of this world differently than most? Reflect Jesus church family and others will want to know Him as they see Him in you.

October 21

Matthew 12:33-34

In a truly amazing display of faith, conviction, and astounding grasp of eternal truth, Paul and Silas are able to pray to God and sing hymns to Him. I think for most of us, it is hard to imagine being able to do that under the circumstances. Remember that they had been arrested, beaten, put in stocks, and thrown into prison. It had undoubtedly been a long and tiring day and the Bible tells us that it was about midnight. They had ample reasons to fall out in painful exhaustion, fear, confusion but they did no such thing. Together, they muster up the courage and strength to pray out loud and even to sing to God. I sit here amazed and wondering if I could be so strong.

The Bible tells us in Matthew 12:33-34, "...For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart." Friends, there are plenty of times in our lives where we are able to "muscle" our way through bumps in the road by using cliches and platitudes to garner enough strength to hold on. One might say we can fake it for a while. The problem is that when we hit a serious, life threatening, breath taking, heart stopping moment, the truth comes out. What I am talking about are the moments when weak, shallow, immature "faith" just is not enough. It is when we begin to discover that our faith is nothing more than old wives tales, coffee mug phrases that are no more than surface level mantras that never reached our hearts.

Anyone can look like they have strong faith when the sun is shining or when the wind is nothing more than a gentle breeze. It is when all of our resources, abilities, and strengths are not enough. It is that moment when we realize, "I can't fix this." It is in those moments that we begin to discover what is truly in our hearts. When the pressure is turned up, we will find out what is in us by what is squeezed out under pressure. Well, when Paul and Silas were put in the jail cell, what came out of them is what was in them. We heard prayer and praise because their hearts were full of the Spirit and accustomed to talking with God and giving Him honor and praise. Their natural reaction to their circumstances was prayer and praise. I wonder what ours is.

Folks, before you get depressed or discouraged thinking that you do not and cannot measure up, pause and think about how this became possible in Paul and Silas' lives. They did not wake up one morning and have this much faith, confidence, and conviction in their hearts. They got to this point the exact same way that you and I can too. Before you can hold this type of conviction, you must have this much understanding. I have heard it said before, "You can't convince your heart of what your mind does not believe." So, before you can react under pressure like they did, you must know why you should. Your mind has to believe that it is logical and reasonable to trust God even when the darkness presses in on you.

We often talk about understanding the "indicatives" of God's Word so that we will have reason to perform the "imperatives" of God's Word. To put it simply, we need to know why before we can honestly do the what. The deeper we grasp and hold onto the truths of God's Word the easier it is to be radically obedient in times of stress. Beloved, it is so important that we dig into the doctrines that we believe. With the help of the Holy Spirit, who illuminates the Word, all of us can grow to a deeper level of understanding. From truly understanding what Jesus did to save you (the depth He went to and price He paid), how deeply lost you were (total depravity and enmity with God), how actively involved in your life (intercession and advocating) and how dedicated He is to safely getting you home (Romans 8), all of the "meat" behind these doctrines will give you the resources and love for Jesus to stand strong against the toughest of circumstances. You can do it!

October 22

Romans 8:28

Yesterday, I wrote about the real, genuine, deep knowledge of God's Word that shapes and molds our hearts. The moments when our minds sincerely grasp the truth, and it transforms our hearts is necessary for life transformation to occur. For example, when I wonder whether or not God actually loves me, how can I know? How can I settle that in my own heart and when I do, what is the impact? You see, we all know that life is full of challenges and even tragedy. When "awful" events happen in our lives, how are we to interpret that? Events happen that may cause us to question God's goodness and love towards us. I have found that until a person is convinced of God's love, they will always doubt Him in hard times which opens them up to attacks from Satan.

When I look to the Bible, I read many verses that tell me of God's love. There is no greater display of His love than the very cross on which Jesus hung, bled, and died. I learned a long time ago to hold every circumstance in my life up with the cross as the backdrop. Christ displayed His love for us so that we could see it clearly and be captured by it. To take it even farther, the Bible tells me in Romans 8 that there is nothing that can separate me from His love (vv. 35-39). Also, I am told in Romans 8:32, "He did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us, so how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" It is obvious to me that God wants us to know of His great love for us in order to give us a deep sense of security for this life. God wants the truth that He died for us and will safely get us home to serve as an anchor and hope for our souls so that we can get on with living life for His glory and our joy.

So dear ones, we are to read a verse like Romans 8:28 with that in mind. It is in the darkest of times that we doubt the truth of this verse the most. When Paul wrote, "*All things* work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purposes," we must be able to interpret the "*all*" in light of this truth. It does not say *some* things or only the easy and good things. I know I have said this before, but it needs to be said again, God did not say that all things are good. If I lose a loved one or experience a gut-wrenching tragedy, it is not good. I don't run around skipping and laughing with glee and joy when my heart is broken. So, what is "good" about the things that cause me pain and heartache?

The "good" in God's plan is our transformation. For all of the not so good things that enter into our lives by the hand of God, we are to realize they are being used for the good purpose of sanctification. The reality is that God's first priority in the life of His children is transformation into the likeness of Christ. Within in that process is His knowledge that there is no greater gift that He could bestow upon us. If God only gave us the things that make for momentary and temporal happiness in this life, we would actually be stunted in our growth and miss so much of what matters most and what would allow us to see the most precious and beautiful aspects of God's nature.

My simple point to ponder today is that we must be willing to do the hard work of wrestling with the deep truths of God's Word so that our hearts are convinced that everything that God allows or ordains for our lives is under His personal and loving control. Paul and Silas could pray and still sing hymns to God because they did not waste time wonder if God actually loved them since intense trials were upon them. That issue was already deeply settled in their hearts and minds, so the default was, "This is from God and is for good." The good in this case was the salvation of others AND yet another experience where Paul and Silas got to see God perform a miracle. Along with the salvation of the jailer and his household, they saw Romans 5:3-5 lived out – they were not disappointed.

October 23

Philippians 4:5-9

I wrote earlier this week of the importance of having brothers and sisters together to live out the Christian life. It is as we do life together, and walk out what faith looks like, that we “see” the beauty of the body of Christ in action and all that we “say” about our faith becomes visible and attractive. There is another, even more important Person that must be present in the mix too. If a group of folks gather who genuinely care for each other, who enjoy being together, and may even be about service in their community, but do not have God in the mix, then they are simply a social club of some kind. I am not saying that is necessarily a bad thing, but I am saying it is not a Christian or godly thing without the Lord as the means and the reason for the gathering and service.

At the end of Philippians 4:5 it says, “The Lord is near.” Keep in mind that Paul is writing this letter too. The basis for the strength to not be anxious or worry is the presence of God. I want you to see today what the result of His nearness can and should be in your life. Paul exhorts the readers, and us too, to focus on the reality that God is right there with them. Because He is God and because He is present with us, our response in hard times should first be to pray and to talk to God about the situation in which we find ourselves. Take a look at verse 4 of that same passage and you will read of Paul telling us to “rejoice in the Lord always.” How? The answer is because He is near. He is near in every circumstance. There is never a challenge that you and I face without Him being right there next to us. I often imagine our Creator God, the One who is all powerful and all-knowing standing in our midst being totally ignored.

Can you picture a person running around in turmoil, confusion, devastated and in a panic all the while GOD is right there and is being left out. Dear ones, He is near and is the source of strength and peace in our troubles. Paul and Silas were rejoicing while in that jail cell because they knew that He was in there with them and where God is, there is no need for His children to panic. You might think that there is no way you could have behaved the way they did, but you would be wrong. There is no way that you could have in your own strength, but when you trust Him, He becomes your strength and your peace. Let’s look at the rest of our text for today.

Paul says that because He is near, we should turn to Him in prayer. We are taught to let Him know of our needs, even as we thank Him for His presence, provision to date, His precious promises, and so on. Now once you have done that, notice what happens next. Verse 7 says, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Folks that is an incredible promise. When you focus on God, trust His love for you, and believe in His perfect, sovereign control of all things, then you will find that He gives you a peace that protects your heart and your mind. In other words, He will not let your thoughts take you, permanently, to bad places. Simply put, God take away your worry and gives you peace even though you don’t necessarily understand everything that is happening to you.

Finally, as you practice living this way (v.9), you will find more and more that not only do you have His peace to guard your heart and mind, but you also have Him. The end of verse 9 says, “...and the God of peace will be with you.” Verse 7 said the peace of God will be with you and now this verse reminds us that the God of that peace will be with you. He is near dear church family so rest in His power and His goodness. Paul and Silas knew and believed some vital truths about God that gave them the victory in the darkest places. By His grace, we can too!