

The Ministry of Suffering
Acts 16:11-40

Romans 5
Matthew 14:15-36
Psalm 115:1-15

This morning we are going to be picking up where we left off in Chapter 16 of the book of Acts, by way of refreshing our memory of what is going on, I want to just go ahead and read this morning starting in verse 1, to the end of the chapter. (Read Acts 16)

So last time we looked at the first 11 verses, pointing out the Spirit's work in Paul and company's second missionary journey. As they had made plans to go to certain cities, and areas, to revisit some of those that they had previously witnessed to, to be an encouragement to them, the Holy Spirit deterred them. Now we don't know what that looked like necessarily, but either way what God had planned for this 2nd outing was different than what Paul had in mind. As I am sure we are all acutely aware of, this happens in our own lives as well. There are many ways in which God directs our course, and I think that the real challenge is recognizing God's work in it. There is not a single one of us who is here this morning that hasn't come by some event, and many of us are in a place that we had never expected to be in, whether in our lives, or our ministry...but the reality is that we are exactly where God has put us at this time.

As we go about our day to day lives, we scarcely are in tuned to what God is doing, and in fact life can seem mundane, and feel, routine, yet even in the mundane God is working out his will in your life. You never know how God may use an opportunity for the gospel through some conversation, or new found friendships. Our perception because we are finite beings, living in a linear timeline with one minute, one hour, one day, month, and year all following one after another we are not always able to see the workings of God or his purpose for the things that are in our lives. Yet, the sovereign God of this universe, the creator and king, through out time is weaving an intricate story of your life. Just as we read a few weeks ago, not one sparrow falls to the ground without God's decree, Not one sparrow, not one seemingly unnoticed, uninteresting bird falls to the ground without God willing it. If this is so, then isn't he even more concerned about you? Where you are at, what you are going through?

God never leaves his children to suffer without merit or purpose, and likewise God never allows us to become complacent for to long in our peaceful moments. Yet in all of these things that unfold before us in the story of our lives, he is there with us, beside us guiding us along the way, like a loving father leading his blind children through a war torn city. We are blind for we do not know what the next minute in life holds for us, yet God does and he is guiding us through. There is chaos, there is violence, and destruction all around us, and we only can see glimpses, we hear the loud rumblings of war that wages, sometimes it seems louder than others and we feel as if we may be swallowed up by it,...but God is there holding our hand guiding us through. I am reminded of the account of Peter walking on the water to meet Jesus, which is why we read that this morning, The boat was in the middle of the sea, at the 4th watch, which is roughly between 3 and 6 am. So it is still dark, they are blind and being tossed about and here comes Jesus walking on the water to them. And Peter calls out in faith, "Lord if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." and Jesus did, to which Peter responded by that stepping out in faith upon the water and he walked toward Jesus....but look what happened in verse 30, "But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid and he began to sink crying out, Lord, Save me!...and Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him and said to him.. O you of little faith, why did you doubt.

Is this not every one of us? We may initially go out in faith...but when the tempest rises, when the troubles come we cry out for we have lost sight of our savior and instead focus on the chaos that we find ourselves in. ?yet he is right there, causing us to walk above it, and through it. Jesus chides Peter, saying O you of little faith, why did you doubt? Think of how profound this statement is.. Peter just stepped out on the water, in the middle of a raging storm, in the dark....yet Jesus says, O you of little faith, why did you doubt. Even though Peter walked out on the water, he became distracted by the storm, and doubt set in, yet Jesus did what he always does with his children...calls our name and reminds us that he is right here. Have you ever been distraught? Lost in the whirlwind of strife or grief, and heard Jesus call your name? It could be through scripture reading, through a song, or a prayer, or even a thought that pops into your head...God reminds us that he is still here, that he loves us and cares for us..and not only that, he will give the strength to endure. When those moments of realization come upon you when you are in the midst of the storm...does that not just instantly start working peace in your heart?

And this peace that comes, it truly is a peace beyond understanding..for when there should by no means be a sense of peace, God brings it. In the account we read this morning in our passage we are looking at, After casting out the demon that possessed the girl who was making a lot of money for her masters, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. Were they distraught at their plight? Were they worrying about the outcomes, they were beaten, whipped and brought into the inner most part of the prison and shackled their feet in the stocks so they are unable to move about...but look at what they were doing in verse 25. “At midnight Paul and Silas were praying, and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening.” They understood the lesson from the first half of this chapter, God thwarted them from going to the cities that they desired and planned, and by the Holy Spirit were told to instead go here, encounter this young possessed slave girl, and be thrown in jail. They were not here by any accident, or mere coincidence. But rather it was by God's calling, so trusting in that, trusting in the God who had brought them to this point...the rejoiced, sang praises, and prayed.

And the prisoners heard, others saw their faith, others saw and heard the peace that they were given in a time when by human reckoning they should have been besides themselves with anxiety and fear...but God gave them peace. And even when the earthquake came, opened all the doors, broke all their chains, again they were set free they did not instantly rush out to freedom...which I find interesting. God having freed Paul from prison before by such miraculous ways, has again done so..yet he and Silas remain in their cell for a moment as the guard come running in to see what has happened. The guard was about to kill himself, for if the prisoners had escaped under his watch, he would have been likely killed as what we saw with the guards in the previous chapter when Paul was freed. But Paul calls out, saying. “Do yourself no harm, for we are all still here. Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, Sir's what must I do to be saved?” I often think of such accounts, and the intricate web of events that happen in my own life, how God has worked events and even times of suffering to be a witness to others. I think we can become so self absorbed in our own plight, we lose sight of God's purpose in it all. And maybe we never find out this side of he veil, maybe God doesn't give us that insight into the effect our lives and witness may have in others, but that does not mean that God isn't working.

I think back to being in the hospital, not knowing what was wrong with me, laying there alone, separated from my family, stuck in a bed, coughing up blood.....and yet, having peace about it. In that time I have never felt closer to God, it was as if I could feel his very presence there with me. I laid there praying not knowing what may come, but not once did I cry out asking...why me, why must I go through this, which is honestly the natural response of our human nature...but instead God laid it upon my heart to pray and meditate on how God uses such things in our lives as a witness to others...and God was gracious to give me a glimpse into that, for my Dad, who was suffering a similar plight, being bed ridden, sick, with an uncertain future told me, that by my conduct, which was nothing more than God himself working peace in my soul, that he was encouraged in his own illness, that God had used me and my own sickness to bring a sense of peace and comfort to my dad who was facing death. God had given my sickness meaning, and the suffering of the hospital stay purpose.

But it was not only me, God used Diana's faith as well as a witness to our own kids...in a time of great uncertainty, not only whether or not I was going to live or die...but even about the day to day needs in life, she told the kids...Watch and see what God will do, how he will provide. And he did, we received so much blessing from the generosity of you all, and even of strangers...God provided for our needs each and every step of the way...he was there, holding out his hand as we were walking across the waves of the storm...saying, "why do you doubt, have faith for you are my children whom I love." "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not more value than they?" This is a lesson that I have had to learn over and over again in my life, for each step and each trial that brings worry about such things God has always provided.

Look at Paul and Silas, beaten and imprisoned, surely awaiting a fate greater than any of us has yet to face...yet they rejoiced, sang songs and prayed trusting in God's mercy, knowing that even if they were to die there it would be all to the glory of the one who has brought redemption by faith. Just as we mentioned before about God's sovereign hand in all things...nothing happens without him not only knowing...but also willing it to be, as Matthew 10 says, again.. "Do not fear those who can destroy the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from your father's will." I think that if we are honest with ourselves, we really fail to grasp this reality. Our faith falters like that of Peter walking out on the water, we may know and understand the concept of God's sovereign will working in our lives but we can not truly fathom its heights nor its depths. We falter and we fail, we distrust and we doubt...but thankfully God's mercy and grace is not predicated upon our faith and belief..but has indeed preceded it...both in the deliverance of the body, and the soul.

"For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves it is a gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast, for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:8-10) Created, born, made, for the good works which God prepared before hand, of which he predestined us to. Yes, this includes your ministry through suffering...God has prepared that trial for you, so that he may be glorified by your witness, so that he maybe glorified by his grace and peace that he gives. Look at this account here in acts, we get a glimpse of God's working in the lives of Paul and Silas....directly guided by God through the Holy Spirit to be exactly where they needed to be to reach and be a witness to exactly the person that God has ordained.

As we all know, and believe that God has predestined, preordained the adoption of his children...for scripture says that before the foundation of the world was even formed he knew you. Your very existence, your very faith, he knew before he even created the universe...let this sink in, I mean really sink in to your hearts, Paul and Silas had a plan, they mapped out their journey with a goal in mind, but the Holy Spirit intervened, forbidding them to journey into the land for which they intended, not only once.. but twice. And he brought them to this town with a demon possessed slave girl who followed them through the town proclaiming the gospel. That's right.. God used a demon, to proclaim his truth...don't let this slip by...God used a demon, to proclaim his truth...look at verse 17. This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." And she didn't just do this once, but followed them and proclaimed this for many days to the point that it was annoying Paul. And here is the second part of this...let us not miss this either, Paul was annoyed by this girl proclaiming that they were sent from God, I am sure if she was interrupting, and it was hard to deal with....but God sent them, to that town, to be annoyed by that demon possessed girl, so that Paul would cast out that demon and be imprisoned. Yes, that is right...none of this is by chance, all of this is by God's design who prepared beforehand these things...which of course begs the question, why? Why would God allow such a string of events, and the suffering of his apostles, to be beaten and imprisoned.

Well, for the very expressed purpose to bring the gospel to the guard in the prison. Do you see it? Did you get that? The soul of this Jailer, and the others in his household who subsequently believed is so important to God that he made sure that Paul and Silas would be put there, so that he would hear the gospel and come to believe. Did Paul and Silas corner him, and push him into a confession? Did they point out how he has broken the law of Moses and is a sinner? No, they prayed, they sang, they worshiped in their time of trouble, the jailer would have seen this...and then God caused the earthquake freeing them, causing their chains to be loosed, and the doors to be open. providing a mercy that they would not suffer at the hands of those who put them there. God worked all of these things so that this jailer maybe called to be his adopted son, God worked in him salvation through the witnessing of the faith of Paul and Silas. All of these things, from the hindrance of the holy spirit thwarting their plans, to them being annoyed by the demon possessed girl to the point of casting out the demon, causing them to be imprisoned, was God's plan and design so that they could be exactly where God needed them to reach exactly who God had intended.

So often we have such a small view of God's workings in our own lives...yet none of it happens outside of his purpose and will. We get caught up in the moment, in dealing with what is directly before us that we lose sight sometimes that God is there with us. This is something that I know I struggle with, often times being full of doubt and then God reminds me of the sparrows, he reminds me how he with a word is able to calm the storms, he reminds me of his grace, his mercy, and his love and brings to mind all of the times I have doubted and yet he provided. I think this is exactly what James meant, when he said Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. And Paul agrees when he wrote to the Roman's saying "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance, character, and character, hope." Each trial, each temptation that is overcome, each moment where we must by the reality of our own weakness turn and trust and rely upon God is another moment, another memory that God uses to show us his love.

These moments of deliverance becomes precious, for they build one upon another and add to the love story of God, proving time and time again his provision and his grace toward us. This is why James says, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, because ultimately our hope lies within the God who loves, and the God who sees, and the God who has sworn upon himself for there is no greater, that he will never leave us nor forsake us. I don't think what James is saying here is that we should throw a party when we are suffering...but rather look to God, and recognize his work through it...and in that way there is a sense of joy knowing that the suffering for the time is not without meaning or purpose but is intended by a God who loves us to work in us, even more hope, building up these times of deliverance as a record in our hearts and minds so that we may see he is merciful, that he is gracious, and that he is indeed sovereign, so that we may have peace in this very moment, so that we may look upon him as we step out into the storm and say, no matter how the waves crash against us, or the thunder overhead roars, we will look to him as our strength and stand in the midst of it praising him. No matter if our hearts are imprisoned by doubt, troubled with fear and despair, God always sends an earthquake to awaken us, and he shatters those chains of doubt and shines in the hope of deliverance.

Who are we, that God should love us so? A people prone to doubt, prone to fear, a people of so little faith. Yet God loves us so, that he is always faithful, he never falters or fails. For he so loved us that he sent his son to die so that we maybe reconciled to him....he brought before us the gospel so that we may hear and we may believe just like he did this Jailer, just like he did with the Ethiopian Eunuch, just like hie did with Cornelious, just like he did with the apostle Paul. He sought us, he bought us, he redeemed us, and he loves us. My, will not THIS God who has done all of this also care and provide for us in everything? I know that each and every one of us this morning is dealing with something in our own lives, and it seems that some sort of trials never end....yet God is faithful, and God freely gives the grace that is needed for each and every day. God not only loves us, he sees us, and God is not only able to deliver, but is willing....to me it is the the fact that God is willing to stoop down to scoop me up that says more to me then believing in his sovereign ability. For he is God, the creator of all by whom nothing is impossible which a word he has caused the universe to exist...and yet this God is willing...no, he desires to be merciful me. What else can we do, but to bow down and worship him, who time after time is faithful when we are not, who provides though we doubt, who loves though we may be bitter and angry.

Let us go from today even more determined to rest upon him, let us go from today with a sense of joy and relief believing that God is not only able...but he is willing to deliver us and see us through what ever it is we may be suffering this morning. With this God, who has loved us before the foundation of the world, we can have hope, with this God who has called us, who chose us to be his, we can have peace, with a Savior who has love us so, who came to give his life so that we may live, we can rest, knowing that we have a hope just as Abraham did, looking to a new city, a better city which is not of this world, and that one day we will stand in the very presence of our God and all of these troubles, these worries, these doubts, and trials of today will be distant memory as we praise and worship our Lord and Savior, who is ever faithful, who is ever loving, and who is willing to shower us with his mercy.