

Part 38: A Gospel Worth Trusting In

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I'm sure you've heard the phrase before, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." It's taken from a poem by Robert Burns which describes the plight of a mouse who was so concerned with the upcoming winter that he labored and toiled to build a den only to have a farmer turn the den over while plowing his field.

The farmer saw the panic stricken mouse and realized that for a mouse—that's a lot of panic. Certainly he can find another hole, or maybe the corner of a barn somewhere. But as the farmer thinks of the relative size of the mouse's concerns—he begins to reflect on his own.

He too was making plans to care for his own concerns. He tilled his field so he might provide food for his family, he had a winter to survive, and while he had made plans—they were just as vulnerable as the mouse's. This led him to the painful realization "the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry."

The later writer John Steinbeck drew out this theme in his short story, "Of Mice and Men." The story highlights the reality of failed plans and how concerned hearts often do little to prevent life's pain.

It would be great if this experience lived only in literature—but more often than not it's the true story of our own lives. Christian or not—we live in a world with trials and concerns. And Christian or not—everyone trusts in something. Everyone makes a plan in accord with what they think will actually grant them the desires of their heart. The question then is, "Is the object of our trust certain enough for the concerns of our life?"

As the hymn writer John Newton was nearing death, he wrote to those who were concerned for his health saying this: "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great savior." In the face of things falling apart—Newton had found one thing that buoyed all his concerns. Our passage today highlights that same certainty but in narrative form.

Our passage today includes pleas, prayers and plans that seem to be unfilled and unheard and yet this passage highlights what it looks like to trust in Jesus with an unshakable hope in the midst of a concerning world.

The title of the sermon today is "A Gospel worth Trusting In." And our main idea is this: **Trusting Jesus brings clarity and comfort to life's concerns.**

If you're a Christian, my guess is you already agree with that statement. Your question might be: What does it look like to trust in Jesus when my plans don't seem to be working? What if your problems seem to be caused by your attempt to trust in Jesus?

If you're not a Christian, it could very well be because you aren't quite sure that Jesus provides any real comfort in the face of what the reality of what you're going through.

But what's wonderful about this text is that it not only proves the historic trustworthiness of the Christian hope—but it shows us what it looks like to trust in Jesus in three specific areas.

Those areas will be our three points today: **Relationships and God's Providence, Plans and God's Priorities, and Problems and God's Promises.**

This text shows the beautiful harmony of God's sovereign plan over all things and the real human experiences of those who live inside of it. There's real pain, real plans, and real hardship—but trust in the God who is really in control provides comfort and clarity.

This is our first point this morning **Relationships and God's Providence.**

C.S. Lewis once said that, "To love at all is to be vulnerable." He goes on to say, "Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements."

I'm honest enough to admit my own cynicism often holds me back from deep relationships. As a pastor, and as a friend, I've been bitten far too many times by people who wish to do me harm. And I've been grieved by those who wish no harm and yet they move away or go to a different church.

This isn't a pastoral problem, it's a people problem. You have probably experienced the same sort of issues in your own life. As our relationships are mediated more and more by impersonal interaction—the pain of face to face relationships are all the more jarring.

But the gospel is the anti-social media. When Christ died for the church he meant to bring real people together into real relationships and close proximity to each other. Our passage today shows how powerful, and sometimes painful, those relationships can be.

Our passage today records three tearful goodbyes, Miletus, Tyre, and Caesarea. But the pain of these goodbyes is not relational failings—but true and deep affection for one another. As Paul is saying goodbye to the churches on the way to Jerusalem they aren't weeping because Paul was a jerk—they are weeping because they are saying goodbye to a good friend—possibly forever.

When I leave town, I try to sneak out early without my kids hearing me because I don't want another painful good bye with them. But notice what Paul did when he stopped to fill up the boat with supplies in Tyre: **Acts 21:4**, "And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days." Paul didn't fear another painful goodbye as much as he cherished another opportunity to encourage and be encouraged by his fellow believers.

I understand that inside this room there are extroverts and there are introverts, there are those who have hurt people and those who have been hurt by people. But notice how the gospel that unites a believer in love to Jesus their savior also creates a supernatural capacity for love among their brothers and sisters in the faith.

If you are a Christian I would call you to consider two things this morning. First, consider if you might out of fear avoid what God has given you out of grace. Are you unwilling to love others because you're unwilling to experience the discomfort of love? If so, I'd call you to not only to reconsider, but to repent.

The New Testament includes 13 direct commands and over 50 statements calling us to love one another.

But second, I'd encourage you to notice how Paul's pit stop didn't keep him from gathering with the church. As you have summer travel plans, don't neglect the fellowship while you're away. Visit other churches, we'd love to help you find ones where you're travelling. And attend the church and seek to be encouraged and encourage those who are there even if you might never see them again.

And you can do this because at the bottom of our love for others is a trust in the providence of God. We love because God told us to, and we know he only wants what's good for us. But we love others in light of God's providence too—and we know that despite how much we love and want to be with those we love—God has a greater love and a greater use for them than we do.

That's what we see in both Tyre and Caesarea as the Holy Spirit makes known to Paul's friends what he has already made known to Paul. In Tyre, they urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. In Caesarea the certainty and the appeals heat up. Along with Philip's daughters, a prophet named Agabus shows up and we read this: **Acts 21:10-12**, "And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' " When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem."

The Holy Spirit wasn't telling the Christians to restrain Paul, and neither did the prophecy tell Paul to stop. In fact, if you recall last week Paul himself was constrained by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. This message wasn't mean to prevent Paul from going, but to prepare Paul.

But it also shows the tension of human love and divine providence. Knowing what would happen, they wished to God that it might not be so. They wished there was another way—a way they could stay with Paul forever. But Paul reminds all of us the center point of trust for human relationships: **Acts 21:13-14**, "Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'" And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

There are times where Paul listened wisely to his friends—but this time Paul knows, and his friends know—that Paul needs to listen to God. Paul says "Brothers, suffering and dying for Jesus is easy for me! But this breaking of your heart is hard for me."

This is why Christian relationships can only be genuinely honest and truly encouraging when we refuse to use them for our own benefit—but see that our friends and our families belong to God. The Apostle John said, "I have not greater joy than knowing my children are walking in the truth." But there are times where walking in the truth looks like walking away from you.

This is a hard pill to swallow sometimes. But what keeps us from being "smothers" and "helicopter friends," is realizing that God is a better friend, a better support, and a better lover than we are.

Our love for others must be most concerned with loving our kids and our friends into the arms of Jesus and his plan for them more than we want them in our own arms and for our own purposes. Parents, is the goal of your parenting shortsighted? Are you more worried about creating a home they never want to leave more than you are worried about a presenting a heaven they long to enjoy? Those who are

dating—are you so open handed that you’re willing to separate romantically, and rest in God’s plan, if it means that both of you can serve God better not as love interests, but as fellow believers?

Relationships, deeply human relationships, are a heavy weight. But God has not called you to carry them alone. He is asking you to trust him with those whom we love. Which is why we should prioritize in all our relationships not our loved one’s need for us—but their need for Jesus.

But if we want to trust others with God’s providence, we ourselves need to trust it as well. This brings us to our next point: **Plans and God’s Priorities.**

The church learned to trust God with Paul—but as Paul arrives in Jerusalem, he’s got problems of his own. In verses 17 and 18 Paul meets up with James and the pastors in Jerusalem. Everyone rejoiced to hear Paul’s stories of success in the Gentile world but without skipping a beat they say: “I’m glad you saw God’s grace *there*, but we’ve got some problems *here*.”

There are three primary problems, James identifies for us two of them. You can see in verse 20 he tells Paul about the believing Jews, and in verse 25 he speaks of believing Gentiles.

Problem one has to do with these believing Jews. James says this: **Acts 21:20-22**, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.”

The Devil likes to use half-truths, and that’s exactly what he’s using here in hopes of leveraging Paul’s own message against him. The full truth shared by all the leaders in Jerusalem and Paul is that Jesus has fulfilled the law. There’s no obligation to keep the law as a means of salvation—it is by grace through faith in Christ alone. But the perversion is that Paul’s critics have been telling the new Jewish Christians that Paul is preaching Jews to forsake the law. That couldn’t be further from the truth—Paul isn’t calling Jews to *forsake* the law for Jesus instead he’s pointing them to the *fulfillment* of the law in Jesus.

The danger of this is twofold. First, believing Jews might forsake Paul’s gospel because if it’s Paul versus the promises of God—they’ll side with the God of the Old Testament. Second, if believing Jews followed Paul thinking that he was divorcing himself from the God of Moses—then they would not be believing Paul’s gospel at all. For the promise of the gospel is God’s covenant to Moses fully revealed and ratified in Christ. There’s danger on either side for the believing Jews.

Problem two then has to do with the believing Gentiles. If Paul were to begin taking up the law again, the Gentiles might think that they need to obey the law in order to be saved—and they would compromise the gospel.

Problem three was that everyone and their dog already wanted to arrest Paul and that his suffering is immanent.

I wonder if you’ve ever had a time in your life where you felt overwhelmed with the potential problems and pitfalls before you? Life is difficult. And sometimes we can feel like it’s a lose lose situation. Maybe you’ve felt this way in trying to navigate a financial burden—where do you even start? Or maybe it’s a career change or a marital issue.

If we aren't careful we can flail from plan to plan hoping to make progress, or we freeze uncertain of what to do.

But what Paul models for us is the clarity in the face of competing concerns of prioritizing God's plans for our lives.

On his way to Jerusalem, Paul wrote to the church in Rome and he asked them to pray for his deliverance in Jerusalem but notice why he prayed that: **Romans 15:30-32** "I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company." He was less concerned with avoiding trouble and more concerned with effectively prioritizing the purposes of God in his life—he wanted to offer acceptable service to God and others.

I was struck by this once as we were praying for safety on a road trip. Why would I pray for safety? Certainly it was because safety is good—but even a non-Christian would admit that. But why would a Christian pray for safety in a distinct way. Then I remembered King Hezekiah's prayer when he was healed from a deadly disease in **Isaiah 38:18-19**, "For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness."

Why did Hezekiah want to be delivered? Because he knew that living people are able to praise God and preach his faithfulness in a unique way. Hezekiah and Paul wanted deliverance not for their own plans in life—but for the purpose of pursuing God's priorities in life. What does God want most for each of us? To obey him, to love him, and to help others see him.

That might sound impractical, but it's the most practical and clarifying truth in the complexity of this Jerusalem problem. When things are confusing—reassessing our situations in light of God's priorities for obedience and evangelism bring us clarity.

That's what we see in the pastoral solution James and Paul come up with. James says this: "Paul, the Gentiles should be good. They know the law doesn't save—but they also know the law isn't pagan. So in light of that, you can participate in the Jewish purifications rites to go into the temple—and make it public." Paul knew that he was not sinning to do this because he wasn't worshipping another God, it was within his Christian freedom to do so. But in doing this, three things could happen: The gospel would be vindicated to the Jews seeing that it was the fulfillment of the law not the forsaking of it, the gospel would be distinctly clear to the Gentiles modeling how they too might carefully preach Christ to the Jews, and three it could dissuade the anti-Paul sentiment and allow him extra time before his imprisonment.

My guess is that when we zoom out of our concerning situations and ask ourselves, "In light of all that seems difficult and burdensome—what best helps me obey God and bear witness to the gospel?" that we too might find such comfort and clarity. When our trust is fixed on this, we find comfort because God's plans and God's goals are dependent upon him—not our circumstances.

And that's a relief because our circumstances and our plans sometimes don't turn out the way we want. But our God is in the heaven and he does all that he pleases.

And here's our final point this morning. **Problems and God's Promise.** This is where we land the plane for our relationships and our plans because despite the faithfulness and wise actions—the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

You might find yourself in a problem some day and think, "What gives God! I did all the right things! I prioritized your priorities, I trusted you with my loved ones—and here I am and nothing worked."

Well, that's exactly what we see going on in this text. **Verse 27** tells us that before the days of purification were done—the gig was up. In fact it was because of Paul's plan to present himself in the temple that he was noticed in the first place.

A riot followed that swallowed up the whole town. Luke describes the scene this way: **Acts 22:30-36**, "They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, for the mob of the people followed, crying out, "Away with him!"

"The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry."

But if you look carefully at this passage—everyone is in a frenzy—everyone is running around like that mouse in Burn's poem. Except for Paul. Paul seems cool and unflappable. Why? Because he knew that his plans might fail—but God's plans never do. And when his faithful plans didn't produce what he desired—he knew that God's plans were working for what he desired.

We can learn something from Paul here. Have you heard the jingle from the Farmers Insurance commercial? "We know a thing or two because we've seen a thing or two." Well, Paul, he knows a thing or two because he's seen it. And he actually calls us to see it too. When he writes to Timothy he says this: **2 Timothy 4:14-18**, "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen."

Paul's plans failed him. Paul's friends left him. But the Lord stood by him so that he could fulfill his ministry. He was rescued by God from the lion's mouth—and he's confident that God will deliver him again. But notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely to you." He says, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom."

Let's not forget that Paul wrote that to Timothy while he was imprisoned in Rome. That imprisonment begins here in our text today. From this moment on, as far as the Bible is concerned, Paul's life as a free man is over. While the Bible doesn't tell us for sure, it's likely that Paul would die in the prison cell he wrote to Timothy from.

God didn't bring Paul out. God might not have even gotten Timothy to Paul. But God got Paul to glory.

You see, it's good to make plans. Paul wanted to go to Spain—but died in Rome. It's good to be concerned for his friends—but when Paul most needed them, no one stood by him. But Paul's ultimate concern was the promise of the one who would never leave him.

You see Paul went from a loving group of believers who said, "Stay with us" into the hands of angry enemies who said, "Away from us." But Paul knew better the promise of the one who said, "I'm right here with you."

It's interesting isn't it that those same words the crowd uttered to Paul are the same words they said to Jesus, "Away with him." Jesus knows what it's like to live in a world where things go wrong. But Jesus also showed us what it's like to trust in God's providence, God's priority, and God's promise in the midst of it all.

And dear Christian, you need this. You need this hope. Paul says this to Timothy, **2 Timothy 3:12-14**, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned..."

I can't tell you that you'll be imprisoned in Rome. But I can tell you that if you want to follow Jesus, you will have difficult circumstances. But continue in what you know. We've got all sorts of concerns, but we should be most concerned about our sin that leads us to death. But Jesus, Jesus suffered the worst of this world so that your sins can be paid for. The result of that is that we can trust him with all of our concerns.

So when you wonder what to do with the relationships in your life—can you trust Jesus with them? When you open up your planner and see your plans for the next year—would you consider how those plans line up with obedience and evangelism? And when your best plans seem to have fallen flat on your face—would you look at Jesus and trust in him. That's what it means to have a gospel worth trusting in—and church—we have such a gospel.