**Solid Ground**

Acts 28:1-11

***What a roller coaster!*** Just on shore after a shipwreck, you feel relieved just to be alive and then thankful that the natives are friendly and take care of you. But then, out of nowhere a poisonous snake bites you and the locals assume you will die a painful death very soon. Somehow you survive! Now the locals think you are a deity of some kind. Then you meet the main leader on the island - but learn that his father is seriously ill. You pray and God heals the man. Then all the sick people come to be healed - and God heals them too.

But there is no reference here to the preaching of the gospel or any kind of faith commitment to Jesus. So Paul may have left Malta feeling discouraged that he wasn’t able to plant a church there.

Highs and lows. Ups and downs. Twists and turns. Luke gives us a detailed look at these moments in Paul’s life for a reason: he wants us to ***see the goodness and faithfulness of God even in the ups and downs of life***.

Our lesson today is:

**Don’t use Circumstances to determine:**

* Your value
* Your happiness
* God’s faithfulness

Imagine ***the roller coaster Paul’s faith would have been on*** if he had let circumstances dictate these things. As the storm went on, he would have despaired of his importance in the plan of God. He would have given up all hope for life and happiness ever again. And from that he would have concluded that God must not be powerful and loving and attentive to his needs.

Let’s think about each of these factors in relation to our own life circumstances and then see ***how God calls us to a better way to determine our value and happiness***.

**Don’t use Circumstances to determine:**

* Your **Value**

“The native people showed us unusual kindness… it had begun to rain and was cold.” Acts 28:2

Surviving the storm and the shipwreck, being welcomed and cared for by friendly natives - could have given Paul an ***overblown sense of his own importance***. He might have been tempted to believe that he was the essential key to God’s work in the world - that he was indispensable and all important.

***Circumstances are simply an unreliable gauge!*** When things were going well, Paul could have concluded he was the man. And when things were going badly, Paul could have quickly become discouraged and begun to believe he was worthless.

**Don’t use Circumstances to determine:**

* Your **Value**

“When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks… a viper came out… and fastened on his hand.” Acts 28:3

Here is Paul just trying to be helpful - and boom - ***poisonous snake***. And the crazy critter doesn’t just bite him and let go - it holds on to be sure the poison goes all the way in. Listen to how the natives interpret this event:

**Don’t use Circumstances to determine:**

* Your **Value**

“No doubt ***this man is a murderer***. Though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.” Acts 28:4

This is a superstitious philosophy today we would call **Karma**. They called it “Justice,” with the idea that the gods would not let someone get away with a terrible crime. Since Paul escaped a terrible shipwreck alive, the divine forces in the universe conspired to be sure he was attacked by a poisonous snake.

Put yourself in Paul’s place: **how would you feel** with the snake attached to your hand? I assume most of you are like me and are petrified of snakes. I’ve gotten somewhat used to large bugs like those super-roaches you have in the south. I know that “bigger is better” when it comes to bugs. But bigger is certainly not better when it comes to snakes. I’ve heard that black racers are good and eat the bugs. But all snakes just seem evil and conniving to me - like they can sense my fear and know they can make me run and scream.

Aside from the pain and fear of the snake itself - how do you feel when things go wrong? Does it make you question your basic value and worth? ***Are you easily discouraged by setbacks?***

For example, nobody likes to be sick. For sure no one enjoys **a chronic illness** or ongoing pain. But do you see the danger here? What if you let a circumstance like this - a chronic disease - determine your value… Do you see how quickly this could discourage you if you start thinking, “I don’t matter… my life does not have value anymore… because I am sick. Because I’m in pain. Because I can’t do A- B - C…”

There is real **danger on both sides of this**. If you’re having a hard time you can get discouraged and feel worthless. Or if you’re in the midst of a good season - doing well at work, feeling good with your health, enjoying positive relationships - you can WRONGLY conclude that because of these things you matter more than others, you are more important, of higher worth…

Paul could have ridden ***the roller coaster of circumstances***, but we know from his other writings that he learned not to do so. He learned to rejoice even in suffering. He learned to be content whether he had plenty of funding or virtually no funding.

Here is our second point.

**Don’t use Circumstances to determine:**

* Your **Happiness**

“The chief man of the island… received us and entertained us hospitably.” Acts 28:7

Paul was uniquely gifted at seeing his ***circumstances as part of God’s direction*** for his life. Even when he was on trial, even when he was chained up and in prison he used his time and his location to minister to people. Here on Malta, fresh from the water and just bitten by a snake, he doesn’t mope around, isolating from people - he is immediately thrust back into ministry to people.

Maybe because Paul made the local news for surviving the snake bite; maybe because Publius was desperate for some kind of help… Paul got invited to the big man’s house. He **could have been ecstatic** about this opportunity and then the healing of so many who came to be healed as well.

But then his ***emotions could have plummeted*** a few days later when they had to leave the island and, apparently, no one got saved - no new church was started. The response of the people is noted in verse 10:

**Don’t use Circumstances to determine:**

* Your **Happiness**

“They also honored us greatly… they put on board whatever we needed.” Acts 28:10

Probably the healing miracles and ministry to the people ***planted lots of seeds*** that would later turn into followers of Jesus and a church being planted. But at this point the focus was just on Paul and his team, not yet on Jesus. Still, Luke provides these details to show how God provided everything the missionary team needed - an island where they could land; friendly people to take care of them; a new ship to keep going; a resupply of resources.

***What is the basis for your happiness?***

Can you honestly answer: JESUS? I think if we’re honest we would all make a pretty substantial list of CIRCUMSTANCES in addition to Jesus for our happiness.

***“I’m happy because…”*** I feel well today. My marriage is doing well. My kids are doing well. I have a good job that is fulfilling and good benefits. I like my house. My car is running at the moment and the AC works again…

Circumstances certainly contribute to our day to day happiness - but ***we need to be careful to not let circumstances DETERMINE our overall happiness***. We sometimes distinguish circumstantial happiness from spiritual JOY. Today I’m blurring that a little to remind us that we need stronger anchors for our happiness - or we will ride the roller coaster of circumstances and our emotional state will be very turbulent.

One more point to make before we shift from what not to do over to what to do.

**Don’t use Circumstances to determine:**

* God’s **Faithfulness**

“When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land.” Acts 27:27

For this point let’s go back to chapter 27 and the storm. **14 days**. Imagine. 14 days. Two weeks straight of fear, danger and tension. Trying to manage a ship that was threatening to break apart in a storm that could drown you at any moment.

Do you see ***how Paul could have been tempted*** in the middle of this storm to question his value, obviously his happiness and also the faithfulness of God?

**Circumstances are simply not reliable to determine any of these things**. We simply cannot see all that is happening in the big picture - we cannot see the rest of the story; we cannot see what is happening elsewhere in the world. In the midst of pain and hardship - like a huge storm at sea - you can’t see anything but the crisis in front of you. And that is not a good place to draw big life and worldview conclusions.

What are you going through now? What is your storm? What is your snakebite? What are your circumstances? ***How do you usually answer these questions:***

* Value - “I matter because…”
* Happiness - “I’m happy because…”
* Theology - “I believe God is good because…”

Most of us tend to answer these questions based on our life circumstances. And because of that, our emotions and our view of God tends to eb and flow. When things are good, we easily believe that God is a good and loving Father. When things are not as good, we struggle to believe in Him - we resist spending time with Him.

This was precisely the issue for **C.S. Lewis** as a younger man and as an academic - he believed there was too much evil and suffering in the world for there to be a good and loving God. It was J.R.R. Tolkien and a couple of other colleagues who gradually helped Lewis see beyond the pain and loss in the world to the goodness of God. In fact, in Mere Christianity, Lewis documents his journey from atheism to faith in Jesus showing how the first big signpost for him WAS evil and suffering.

The fact that he had **a clear and strong sense of right and wrong**, of good and evil - because a clue to him for the meaning of the universe. After all, if there is no God and on eternity, then there really isn’t any such thing as right and wrong. There is only power. But he knew - even as an atheist - that there is a right and wrong. It is right to stand firm with your fellow soldiers in battle, and it is wrong to run away. It is right to protect vulnerable women and children, and it is wrong to abuse them. Everyone knows this. Everyone feels this.

So the existence of evil and suffering ends up not being an argument AGAINST God but is ***actually a signpost pointing TO God***. So here is the positive lesson for today:

**Establish your value and happiness on the Faithfulness of God:**

* “I matter because…”
* “I’m happy because…”

Let me quickly show you **four reasons you matter** and four reasons to be happy that are not based on circumstances but instead are based on the goodness, faithfulness and mercy of God. Circumstances will always go up and down. But the character of God is a firm foundation - an unshakeable source of hope and life and comfort.

**Establish your value and happiness on the Faithfulness of God:**

* I matter because… **God made me**

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.” Psalm 139:13

In the stormy seasons of life we need Biblical lifelines like this to cling to. Why do you matter? Because God made you. ***He formed you. He planned your life.*** He designed every part of you - physically, emotionally, spiritually. That is what gives you value and worth, as it gives all people on earth value and worth - from the moment of conception. God is the author of your life. He is the great artist who is crafting you into a masterpiece.

**Establish your value and happiness on the Faithfulness of God:**

* I matter because… **God loves me**

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us.” 1 John 4:10, NIV

God is love. He made you not because He needed love from you, but because He had love FOR you. ***God designed us for relationship and ultimately He made us to be in relationship with Him.*** All other relationships are shadows intended to point us to the one relationship we are meant to enjoy forever. You matter because God has set His affection upon you. He loves you. What is the proof of that? Listen to the rest of this verse.

**Establish your value and happiness on the Faithfulness of God:**

* I matter because… **Jesus died for me**

“He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” 1 John 4:10

Here is the ultimate **proof that God is love** and that you matter - Jesus died for YOU. The eternal, immortal Son of God gave up His life on the cross - He shed His infinitely precious blood to pay for your sins. Jesus would not have done that for a worthless person. So never say you are worthless. Never believe for a second that you don’t have value. The cross is indisputable proof that every one of us is precious to the Lord. Priceless. One more reason you matter.

**Establish your value and happiness on the Faithfulness of God:**

* I matter because… **God has a plan for my life**

“We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand.” Eph. 2:10

God not only made you and loves you; Jesus not only died to pay for your sins - but all of that was for a specific purpose! God has a plan for your life - ***to use you to reflect His glory and goodness*** in ways only you can. You are His masterpiece - His great work of art. God not only created you in your mother’s womb. He RE-created you in Christ Jesus, at the moment of your salvation, to do specific good works.

Do you feel the significance of this Biblical truth? Don’t use circumstances to define your worth. Let Scripture speak truth to your heart and let the Holy Spirit convince you that you matter to God!

Now let’s apply this to our happiness as well - not determining our happiness based on the ups and downs of circumstances, but based on the rock solid consistency of God’s character.

**Establish your value and happiness on the Faithfulness of God:**

* I am happy because… **God is with me**

“Be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’” Hebrews 13:5

Quoting **Deuteronomy 31**, the writer of Hebrews (probably Paul) urges believers to remain free from the love of money and be content with their lot in life. And the reason he supplies is the presence of God. God has promised to be with us no matter what. Jesus promised this in the Great Commission - “Surely I am with you always, to the end of the age.” It was not Obiwan Kenobi who said that first. Jesus did.

Nothing is more comforting, nothing more encouraging than the ***presence of a loved one***. When you experience a loss or hardship, what is the first thing you do (I hope)? Run to your family, right? You call your parents or your kids and just want to be with them.

This is what we have in **our heavenly Father** - ***His constant presence***. This is the role of the Holy Spirit for us - to be with us - indeed, to be IN US - to comfort and encourage us.

Don’t find your happiness in your circumstances - find your truest and ***deepest joy in the presence of God with you***. Consider the wonder of that reality - the God of the universe; the Creator of all things; the Alpha and Omega; the reigning King who upholds the cosmos with the word of His power; the Lord Jesus Christ; Yahweh, the God of the covenant - this is the God who dwells in your heart! Hold on to that truth! Delight in His presence! Let that be the primary source of your daily happiness. Here is another one.

**Establish your value and happiness on the Faithfulness of God:**

* I am happy because… **God is enough for me**

“Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Psalm 37:4

This is one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted verses in the Bible. This does not mean, “Say a prayer or two and God will give you whatever you want.” Look at what the verse actually says - “DELIGHT in the Lord.” That’s the command. ***Make the Lord your deepest joy.*** Rejoice IN HIM. Enjoy God. Then, as you delight in Him, you will HAVE the desires of your heart.

Do you see the point? It’s not “delight in the Lord and then he will give you that new car or that new job or a million dollars.” It’s “delight in the Lord and then you’ll be happy even if you don’t get the new job or the cancer-free diagnosis or the healthy happy baby you always wanted.

The question is this - ***IS GOD ENOUGH FOR YOU?*** Is God enough for me?

C.S. Lewis said it this way:

Is God **Enough** for you?

“He who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only.” C.S. Lewis

The person who has God and a nice house has no more than the person who has God only. The one who has God and a happy, healthy family has no more than the person who has God only.

Do we really believe this to be true? It’s the test of how worldly we really are - how attached to this world are we really?

***But it’s really just simple math.*** **God is INFINITE**. What do you get when you add anything to infinite? No more, no less. You still have infinite. So the reason we think that we need God and a good job, God and good health, God and a nice family - is because we don’t yet really understand GOD.

If you didn’t come here feeling happy today ***I hope you leave feeling happy***. God is with you. God is enough for you. Two more reasons to be happy.

**Establish your value and happiness on the Faithfulness of God:**

* I am happy because… **Jesus conquered sin and death**

“Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” 1 Cor. 15:57

In **1 Corinthians 15** Paul considers the significance of the resurrection of Jesus. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we have confidence in the face of death ourselves. Apart from Jesus, death is the most fearsome enemy. The reason death is an unbeatable enemy is because his weapon is sin. Because people sin, they belong to death and cannot escape from the just penalty for sin - which is death and judgment.

But the death and resurrection of Jesus ***free us from both the penalty and power of sin***. Because the penalty for sin is paid, the weapon of sin is harmless against us. Death has been disarmed! And because Jesus rose from the dead, we know He will raise US from the dead as well. So in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul actually taunts death saying, “Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

Do you feel the joy of this gospel truth? ***Your greatest enemy has been defeated!*** Your biggest fear has been resolved. The most terrible danger looming over you has been resolved. Sin and death hold no fear for the believer. Death has no claim on you. The devil has no case to make against you. Your sin has been paid for and cannot be brought up again in the court of God.

When **Berlin fell and Hitler was dead**, the whole world rejoiced. Soldiers came home, families were restored, millions of Jews were rescued from death camps. The tyrannical maniac was dead. The third Reich had fallen. There was much sacrifice to win the victory, but the victory brought great joy and celebration. VE Day was cause for great joy. The resurrection is the greatest cause of celebration!

That should make you VERY HAPPY. One more point.

* I am happy because… **Jesus is coming soon to fix everything**

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command… Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” 1 Thess. 4:16-17

Paul wrote this to the church in Thessalonica to encourage them. He exhorted them to ***encourage one another with these words***. Even in the face of death. Even in the face of great suffering and fear, we know that Jesus is coming back soon. And when that last trumpet sounds all of the Lord’s remaining enemies will be vanquished, all remaining sin will be removed from our hearts, all pain and sadness and suffering and loss will be forever taken away - and ***we will be with the Lord FOREVER!***

That’s our lesson for today.

**Don’t use circumstances to determine:**

* **your value and happiness and the faithfulness of God**

**Use the faithfulness of God to determine:**

* **your value and happiness**

Don’t trust in your day to day experiences to establish the nature and character and goodness of God.

Instead, ***use the faithfulness of God to determine your value and happiness!*** Hold on to the goodness and glory, the wisdom and mercy and grace of God - let that be the solid ground beneath your feet. Then you will not be tossed and thrown about by the wind and waves of this life. You will remain secure in the solid rock of God’s sovereign goodness.

Let’s pray.