

Father, we come before you. What a privilege to proclaim your praise in these ways. And now we come to your word. I pray that through this broken vessel that you would speak your truth and your love. In your name, Jesus, I pray.

Amen.

Well, as the kids are walking out, I want you to consider a question. Perhaps you have experienced this before, where you're in your house and you look at your dinner dishwasher, and you see the way that your dishwasher has been loaded, and you look at someone in your family and you say, why did you do it that way? Right? Because what you really mean, honestly, you know the best way to load the dishwasher, and this is not the best way to load the dishwasher. So, you know, if we're honest, it's not just about dishwashers.

We have a lot of opinions about the best way to drive, the best way to bake, to grill, to organize, to exercise just life in general. We have a lot of opinions about the best way to. You fill in the blank. So here's the best way to accomplish life according to culture. I'd say it's been drilled to many of us, probably for much of our lives, and it goes something like this.

First, you have to find a good college eventually, and then after that, you find a good job, you find the love of your life, you get married, you start a family, you get some promotions, you make more money, you then have enough money to retire, and boom, you have joy and satisfaction. This is the best way to get what we want in life, right? So maybe throw in some adventures here and there, or you may look at what I have up here and you may swap some things out or add in some of your own things. So let's call the prize in this little diagram up here, let's call the prize, in the end, it's joy and satisfaction. So you can think of this in terms of the broader arc of your whole life on earth, or you can think of this in a particular season when you have a particular goal or desire or prize.

Today, what I want to do is look with you at a particular season in Paul's life, and we'll consider his goal or his desire, and then consider the way he got there. We read about his goal or desire in Romans 1, verses 9 through 12, where Paul is writing to the church in Rome, and he says, I remember you in my prayers at all times. And I pray that now, at last, by God's will, the way may be opened up for. For me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to make you strong.

That is that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. So Paul longs to go to Rome, and he longs to do this for good reason. To impart some spiritual gift so that he may be blessed by them and he may be a blessing to the believers in Rome. So I could imagine that as Paul has this desire to get to Rome, that he has some thoughts about what is the best way to get himself to Rome. It just so happens that the passage we're going to look at Today in Acts 21, 26, 28, 16, tells this story of the way Paul got to Rome.

Now, I just said, you heard it right, seven chapters that we're covering. So, so we're not going to cover a lot of details in these chapters, but what I want to do is kind of look at the overarching trajectory and pull out some general learnings from what we see on Paul's travels. So the first thing Paul does is he wants to go to Jerusalem. And perhaps it's because he hopes that the church in Jerusalem will commission him to, to go as a missionary to Rome. So he sets out to go to Jerusalem, but.

But he begins to hear from other followers of Christ warning him, don't go to Jerusalem. It's. It's not going to go well. He even has a prophet come to him and tell and prophesy that if you go to Jerusalem, you are going to be imprisoned and experience hardship. But Paul is.

He is convicted by convinced that the Holy Spirit wants him to go to, to Jerusalem. So he goes to Jerusalem and sure enough, he hits opposition right away. There are some Jews that are stirring up trouble in the crowd. And, and we read in verse 20 or chapter 21, verse 30, and I didn't have this one on the slide. The whole city was aroused when they hear Paul preaching in the temple.

And the people came running from all directions, seizing Paul. They dragged him from the temple and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole

city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. So he at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw that the commander of his and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

So, so Paul experiences opposition. Right away he's being beaten. And then the Romans have to come in and they break it up and they begin to take him away. And then Paul asks, before you take me away, can I address the crowd. So he begins to address them in Aramaic.

And they calm down a little bit. And Paul tells them his story of meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus. And as he tells them this story, there's this sobering part where he's remembering what he had been doing, what his life was like before he met Christ. And. And he.

He tells them, you can read in verse 19 of chapter 22, he. He recalls when he went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believed in Christ. So I wonder what God is doing in Paul's heart as he's remembering his actions to wrongfully imprison and beat those who follow Jesus. And now he's in the midst of. Of being beaten and imprisoned wrongfully for following Jesus.

So he finishes his story, and the crowd is listening. And then he finishes with this conclusion that. And the Lord told me to take the message of his good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. And this gets the Jews all stirred up. And they respond in this way, in verse 22 of chapter 22, they say, okay, the crowd listened to Paul until he said this about being sent to the Gentiles.

Then they raised their voices and they shouted, rid the earth of him. He's not fit to live. Rid the earth of him. He's not fit to live. So at that point, Paul is taken away.

He's. He's about to be flogged by the Roman officials, and he tells them that he's a Roman citizen. So then they realize, well, we can't flog him. We can't beat him before he's been tried. So we need to take him and try him, and we need to figure out why in the world is everybody so mad at him Anyway, so they take him before this Sanhedrin and Paul.

The Sanhedrin gives these charges against Paul. And Paul sees that it's not going well, and he mentions something about the resurrection. Then that causes the Pharisees and the Sadducees to argue with one another, and violence breaks out. And the commander thinks, I need to get Paul out of this. So Paul gets.

Or the commander gets Paul out of that, plans to bring Paul to Caesarea so he can have a trial in Caesarea with the governor named Felix. Jews get wind of this trial, about this travel from Jerusalem to Caesarea. So 40 men plan on attacking Paul along the way and killing him. And by God's grace, that is found out. And Paul actually travels with 200 soldiers and gets.

Gets to Caesarea safely. So he arrives in Caesarea. And he waits for five days more. Waiting. He waits for Ananias, the high priest, and Tertullus, the lawyer, to come from Jerusalem to.

To share their charges before Governor Felix in the trial. That will happen soon. So finally that day arrives. They share. They.

They share their accusations against Paul. And then Felix responds in this way in 24 verses 22 and 23, Felix, who is well acquainted with the way, he adjourned the proceedings. He then ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard. So the proceedings stop. Paul is sent away to be under guard, sent to his jail cell.

Several days after that, Paul is again waiting in jail to see what happens next. Several days later, Felix brings his wife, because Felix's wife is a Jewish, a Jewess. And he believes that what Paul is sharing is interesting. So Felix wants his wife to hear this. So in chapter 24, verse 25, we read about this where Paul is sharing with Felix and his wife.

And as Paul talked about righteousness, self control and judgment to come, Felix was afraid. And he said, you know what? That's enough for now. You. You may leave.

When I find it convenient, I will send for you. When I find it convenient, I'll send for you. Well, then, two years goes by as Paul sits in a prison, somewhat like this. Two years goes by and I imagine, well, I know that if I was there, I would have been asking quite passionately, God, why are you doing it this way? This is not the best way for me to get to Rome.

Why are you doing it this way? So he waits there for two years in this cell. And eventually there's a new governor of the land named Festus. And after a few days in office, Festus decides to visit Jerusalem. And while he's in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin come to him.

And they are still fired up and red hot mad at Paul. And they're not content that Paul is just sitting in a prison for years on end. But, but they want Paul gone. So the Sanhedrin, they come before Festus and they present these charges. And Festus says, all right, well, come to Caesarea and we'll have another trial where Paul will be tried.

So the, the Sanhedrin, they send representatives to Caesarea to stand trial before Festus. They present their try their charges and, and, but none of them can be proven. Festus hears all of this. He thinks, you know what? This is just religious fighting that doesn't have to do with the Roman government.

So Festus wants to send Paul back to Jerusalem so that they can try him and Take care of him. Paul knows that's not going to go well for him. So Paul, he. What is the word? I forget it in this moment.

He appeals to Caesar, and he says, since I'm a Roman citizen, I want to be in a fair trial before the emperor. So Festus says, okay, if you appeal to Caesar, then to Caesar you will go. Festus doesn't really know what charges to write down for Caesar to know about. So Festus invites King Agrippa in. And so King Agrippa comes and listens to Paul for another what feels like a trial and another few days of waiting for that to happen.

Agrippa listens to Paul and he agrees with Festus that, you know what? This man doesn't deserve prison or death. But he's appealed to Caesar, so we're going to send him off to Caesar. So at that point, they get a boat, and Paul is sailing off to get to Rome. But then what happens is this violent wind comes, and it sends the boat in this wild direction, and there's a storm, and there's days and days that they're lost at sea.

Sea. And many of the men were giving up hope of being saved, and they went a long time without food. And again, if this was us in this scenario, I think at this point we would be saying, God, why are you doing it this way? This is not the best way.

14 days they were lost at sea with storms and darkness and no food. And they crash on this sandbar. And the. The ship falls apart enough that there some are swimming to shore, if they can. And the ones who can't swim are finding planks of wood and floating it to shore.

They finally get to shore, and they use the planks of wood to start a fire because they're freezing and they're soaking wet, and they start a fire. And then Paul is bitten by a snake. It just gets worse. And it gets worse.

By God's grace, he heals Paul from the snake bite. And they find favor with one of the officials there. And they stay there for three months. And there's all sorts of other fascinating things that happen. But after three months, they find a ship and they head the rest of the way to Rome, where Paul is put under house arrest and has more waiting for a trial.

So in all of this, again, if I was in this situation, I would say, God, why are you doing it this way? I mean, we all know if we typed into Chatgpt, what's the best way to get to Rome, this would not be it yet, you know, Then we're reminded, okay, chap et. Whatever that's called. I AI that's for data collection, not life direction. But that's a whole nother thing we can get into which we won't get too distracted by.

So Paul has right to ask this question. God, why are you doing this? I find it so interesting that Philippians 3, verses 8 through 9, Paul writes this. And. And many scholars believe that Paul wrote Philippians while in the jail and in.

Or while under. I'm sorry, while in the jail, in Caesarea, waiting for those two years. So he's. He's in jail and he writes

this. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things, I consider them garbage that I may gain Christ.

Paul had good motivations to travel to Rome. But in the end, the real prize, from Paul's perspective, after the fact, the real prize was knowing Christ. There's this. He also writes in Second Corinthians, he writes that these light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that. That far outweighs them all.

So there's something about Paul's interaction with, or his awareness of the presence of God in the midst of struggles that he is pausing and he's listening to what the Lord has to say to him in that moment, because the Lord is speaking to us in every moment. So as Paul pauses and listens to the Lord, what he hears from the Lord draws him deeper and deeper into a relationship of knowing Christ. So Paul then says that this knowing Christ, this far outweighs any of the difficulty that I'm experiencing in these moments. The path that God had for Paul to get to Rome was vastly different than the best way that Paul could have envisioned. The path that God had for Paul to get to Rome was the path that was leading Paul to the extent that Paul was open to it, to a deeper and deeper relationship of knowing Christ.

Beatings, imprisonment, false accusations, hardship, hunger, shipwreck, snake bite. Wasn't that all just a monumental waste of time? Wasn't that an incredibly inefficient path? Paul says it was about knowing Christ. Paul must have been interacting with Christ in such a deep way in those moments that he paused long enough to listen to the Holy Spirit's voice again, who is always speaking to us.

So the question that I then ask is, what about you? What about me is this, you know, that we mentioned before, this college, job, spouse, family, money, retirement. Is this our path? Is this the best way to Go to the prize that we hope for. I think a lot of times this feels like my desired path, but here's what actually happens when I think I'm on this path is I have a significant relational difficulty for myself or that of a loved one.

It breaks into my path and it messes it up. Then I have a significant emotional difficulty for myself or that of a loved one and it breaks into my path and it messes it up. Then I have a significant financial difficulty for myself or a loved one and it breaks into my path and it messes it up. Then I have a significant medical difficulty for myself or that of a loved one and it breaks into my path and it messes it up. And it does not feel like I'm reaching the joy and satisfaction that I was longing for.

These are the moments where fear and anxiety and even despair creep in and we cry out, God, why are you doing it this way? This is not the best way.

What I learned from Paul, from this wild path that he had to Rome, is this the best way to walk through whatever life circumstances I find myself in, is to be aware of God's presence every moment. I'm convinced that Paul did this, that he was aware of God's presence. In the midst of beatings, in the midst of imprisonment, in the midst of false accusations, in the midst of hardship and hunger and shipwreck and snake bite, Paul was aware of God's presence with him. The Holy Spirit never stops, never stops whispering God's truth and perspective and love to me. He never stops.

In every moment I can listen to him and receive the Holy Spirit's encouragement and direction and comfort. In the most difficult, heart wrenching moments in life, God is present with us whispering comfort. It's true that he acts in ways that we don't understand. He allows things that we don't prefer. He works through circumstances in ways that we never predict and often don't see.

And he is present with us in every moment. In each of these moments, God is inviting us, me into a deeper and deeper relationship of knowing Christ.

There's one very critical question that I want to encourage you to remember. I think this is so important and it's not the question, why God, are you doing it this way? It's not the question, how can I better my situation? It's the question, God, what do you want me to hear from you in this moment? Because I know he's always speaking.

I just need to stop and listen. God, what do you want my mind to be placed on in this moment? I know what the evil one wants my mind to be on. The evil one wants me to think back, remember what this person did to you. Remember how

hard this was.

Remember how you don't deserve that difficult thing. Play that tape over and over again. The evil one wants me to never stop playing that tape. And what grows from that is bitterness and fear and anxiety. And at some point, I get exhausted from playing that tape and I just need some kind of distraction.

So I scroll or I social media, I look at things, news stuff. I just distract me from this endless cycle. I go to try to find endless entertainment or I eat or whatever it is. We try to find a distraction from this. And I want us to pause, to stop and to listen.

The Holy Spirit is always speaking to us. Recently I had this one of these times where I'm cycling through the tape, I'm thinking, you know, ah, why did this person say this thing and do this? And oh, and just playing that tape over and over again, and the Holy Spirit reminds me, really, that is not the voice of God. That is the voice of the evil one that you're just listening to right now. And I try to pause and say, God, what are you saying to me right now?

And what I feel in that moment is his unconditional love. I feel his unconditional love. And I feel him asking me to share his unconditional love. I think that's what Paul experienced so often in the hardships, the inconveniences, the waiting, as he paused and he listened to the Lord and he experienced something from the Lord that was feeling his unconditional love and the challenge to share his unconditional love. And that led him to an experience of knowing Christ.

And he says, that far outweighs any of this junk that I'm going through right now. I know sometimes this. This seems like pie in the sky thinking, right? But I think many of us have had an experience, even if small, of experiencing something, of knowing Christ. And as we experience what it is to know Christ, we know that that is the greatest thing that this earth has to offer, this experience of knowing Christ.

I may or may not be able to tell you the best way to load your dishwasher, but I know, I'm convinced in Scripture that the best way to live our life is in constant awareness of the presence of God and the voice of the Spirit speaking to me in every moment. Would it be that I would listen? That we would listen? I want to close in prayer, and as I pray, I just want to invite you all into a moment where we can be listening together to the Lord. And as we listen, eventually the praise and worship team will come and play a song of response.

And if and when you want to stand, that's great. If you're just kneeling and continuing to talk to the Lord, and that's great. But I want us to listen. Father, I thank you that you reveal yourself to us in the midst of trouble and hardship and all sorts of things. I thank you that you reveal yourself to us.

And we ask God that you would help us know in every moment, in this moment, right now, God, what are you saying to us?