

The Story / "Grace Gone Viral" Sermon 3: "Paul's Final Days"

April 26, 2015

Did you know that a "miserable Christian" is an oxymoron? I didn't say a miserable Christian is a moron, though I could have, I said they are an oxymoron. Do you know what an oxymoron is? It is a combination of words that go together but contradict each other. There are all kinds of oxymorons. Here are a few that are pretty funny:

- How about Military Intelligence? That's just a joke; my brother was in Navy intelligence...
- Or Airline Food. Because sometimes it's not.
- Or a Little Bit Pregnant. Never actually seen that.
- Or how about these: Government Organization, or Government Worker - just teasing!
- Or these are pretty funny: How about Childproof (yeah right!), or Rap Music, or Jumbo Shrimp (I wish).
- For geeks there are Microsoft Works (occasionally), and Computer Security (we used to think), and User Friendly (rarely!).
- Two more. How about a Temporary Tax Increase (that's right up there with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny), or a Federal Budget (I wish!).

Well, one of the saddest oxymorons is a miserable Christian. And we've got a bunch of oxymorons in this room, right here at Capital City. A whole bunch of you guys... All right, full disclosure: a whole bunch of us guys are oxymorons. We are supposed to be Jesus followers, but we get grumpy and cantankerous; irritable and whiny; anxious, and fearful, and worried. We spend way too much time as miserable Christians.

And here's the deal: a miserable Christian is always missing the point; a miserable Christian is always sidetracked, twisted. Listen: a miserable Christian is always either forgetting, or denying some fundamental truth about our God. Do you buy that? And when we are miserable Christians ... it is no wonder they don't want to be part of us. Our misery robs the church of its attractiveness, and its power. Do you buy that? ...

I don't do this much, but I'm going to give you a little Greek lesson this morning. I want to teach you two Greek words that are closely related to each other:

chara, and charis. Chara means "joy," and charis means "grace." Back in the world of the New Testament they used a form of chara to say hello: "chaire." Literally: "joy to you." That's kind of a nice way to say hello.

But we Christians kind of changed the way we greeted each other. Instead of chaire: "joy to you"; we started saying charis: "grace to you." Because for us, grace is deeper. Listen: if you get grace, you've got joy. If you really get grace, you'll taste joy joy. Which is why at the end of my emails or letters I always put the word "charis." Most people don't know what it means - that's okay. I'm just wishing them grace ... because that's so much deeper.

Now, listen, you oxymorons... All right, full disclosure: Listen, we oxymorons, a miserable Christian is a Jesus follower who is missing it on grace. A joyless Christian is always forgetting grace. And we forget it so often. Sometimes because we have been seduced, we have been enticed into pursuing the wrong thing. Instead of pursuing grace, which always leads to joy, we pursue happiness, which always leads to misery. Do you buy that? Maybe not yet.

You see, as Americans we are told that we have an unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness. And that may be true. But we think that means happiness is the goal. And we think that means we have a right to be happy, even if it makes someone else unhappy ... including God. And that's ... stupid. In fact, it's stupid twice. It's not only stupid because it leads us away from God; it's stupid because it doesn't work. The pursuit of happiness almost never leads to ... happiness.

We read about one study in 2012 that digs into what makes people happy, or so people think. They found that healthy people were about 20% happier than unhealthy people. Makes sense - so if you want to be happy, be healthy. They found that married people were about 10% happier than those who had never been married. Maybe. So if you want to be happy, get married, right? And they found that those with a whole lot of money were 3.5% happier than those with little. So, if you want to be happy, chase money, right?

But what we find so frustrating is that all of these things are elusive, and can slip away so quickly. At some point your body will begin to break down. If your health is what makes you happy, misery is coming. How about marriage? Well,

about 50% of our marriages fail. And most of the rest struggle, hard. Marriage is never continual bliss, and all families are in some way dysfunctional. So if you are counting on your marriage to make you happy, misery is coming. How about money? Guys, if your goal is more money, you will never have enough money. You'll always want; you'll always need "more." And what we do have can slip away so quickly. If it's about money, misery is coming.

Now here's what's funny to me. Our culture will tell you that our faith in God is built on myth. Well, the oxymoron is that culture, which pokes at our myths (they think) is obsessed with a myth. They think you can be happy by pursuing this stuff. Well, that's a myth that is disproved millions of times every day. In fact you are evidence of the stupidity of that myth.

You see, God doesn't deal in myth. God doesn't promise you more money, or better health, or a perfect family. God doesn't promise to make your life more trouble-free so you can be happy (I don't care what you hear some preachers tell you). God isn't there to give us a boost in our pursuit of happiness...I'll never forget Dr. Buford Bryant, at Emmanuel School of Religion, in chapel one day. He looked at us students, piercingly, and he said, "Gentlemen, God didn't call you to be happy. He called you to do a job for him." And he was right. You see, you don't find happiness in the pursuit of happiness. That's the paradox, that's the myth. And God doesn't deal in myth. He is trying to show us something infinitely deeper, infinitely better...

Okay ... if anyone had the right to be an oxymoron - a miserable Christian - it was the apostle Paul. Now Paul is one of the biggest of the Bible dudes. He wrote more books of the Bible than anybody else. In fact, he wrote nearly half of the books of the New Testament - 13 of the 27. After Jesus, nobody worked harder to grow the early church, nobody did more to shape the early church than Paul. And no one had more right to be an oxymoron.

Right from the first. (A 9.1) You see, before Paul became a Jesus follower he hated Jesus followers. In fact his mission in life was to hunt us down and kill us. So he is on his way to a place called Damascus, hunting us down, when this blinding light shines out of heaven, striking him blind - for 3 days. (9.15-16) And then God sends this Jesus follower named Ananias to Paul with a message. God says, "I want you to tell him that I am giving him a mission - from God - and

I want you to tell him that it's going to be hard. There is going to be pain coming his way, there is going to be persecution, working for me is going to be hard." Ananias was kind of like Dr. Buford Bryant in chapel that day: "Paul, God isn't calling you to be happy. He's calling you to do a job for him." Now would you go? If you were Paul? I mean, God can be pretty convincing, but it's still our choice. Would you sign on?

And what God promised Paul got. You can always bet your life on God's promises. About 20 years later Paul tells us about what his life had been like, on a mission from God (2C 11.24-28) He says, "Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. (We're not talking about little rocks; they left him for dead.) Three times I was shipwrecked. (Another shipwreck is coming.) Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. (Scary) I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. (Because there weren't many police patrolling the roads back then.) I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. (Sometimes that's the hardest.) I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.

Wow! Was it worth it? Would you agree to a mission from God that would build this kind of resume? Would you let your kids sign on, if you thought there was a risk of any of this? And if this was your past, would you want to quit now? Would this be enough for you to tell yourself, "I've done my part; it's someone else's turn this time."

Let's press the fast forward button. It's about 2 years later. Paul is still at it - he's an amazing guy! He's passing by a town called Ephesus, heading for Jerusalem, and he arranges a meeting with the elders of the church there. And here's what he tells them --amazing stuff. He says, "You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now I have done the Lord's work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews. I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. (He says,) I have had one message for Jews and

Greeks alike-the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus. And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. (I am on a mission from God.) I don't know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. But ... but my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus."

Holy cow! Tears, trials, jail, suffering. And yet, courage, and endurance, and trust. He says, "My life is worth nothing to me unless I do what God has called me to do." So he's heading to Jerusalem, and he knows that when he gets there, there's going to be more pain. And he still goes! Would you go? Would you want your kids to see you go? You see, we think life with God ought to end up like some Disney film - where we live happily ever after. But God says, "I don't deal in myth. Life here may be really, really hard. But I'm going to give you something way more satisfying than happiness - way deeper, way richer. That's what Paul had. You see, we think that the center of God's will should be a safe place. It's probably not, but it is the best place to be.

So Paul gets to Rome, and he's arrested. You see, it God says it's going to happen, it's going to happen. And eventually he's transferred to prison in Caesarea, back on the coast. Spends two years there, and guys, this was no Shawshank. No windows, exercise yards, workshops, laundries, cafeterias. We're talking a hole in the ground - a dungeon. Maybe chained, intermittent food, dark, dirty - there are no toilets, guys. The guards were often cruel. Eventually Paul is shipped off to Rome for trial. He has another shipwreck along the way, and when he gets there it's house arrest as he waits for trial, knowing he could die.

Guys, Paul had every right to be an oxymoron - a miserable Christian. Don't you think? ... But he wasn't. Even in prison in Rome he figures out how to keep carrying out his mission from God. He shares Jesus with his guards, he coaches Jesus followers who come to visit him, he writes letters to the churches he has built. In fact, four of those letters make it into our New Testament. We call them the prison letters. Go figure.

And when we read those letters it is fascinating what we don't find in them. We never hear Paul complain about how hard it is to follow Jesus. We never hear

him whine that life isn't fair, or God isn't fair. We don't find any regrets about where he has been, or what it has cost him. He never asks them to pray that God rescue him, or that God will deliver him, that God will make his life different. That would probably be right at the top of our letters.

It's even more fascinating what we do find in those letters. Guys, Paul is in a dance with God, and he loves it. Because he is amazed by grace, he is obsessed with grace. And his captivation with grace spills over into ... not happiness ... but joy - which is way deeper, way more satisfying.

Philippians in our Bible is one of those prison letters. Here's what he says in chapter 1. He says, "Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray (which was a lot!), I make my requests for all of you with joy." (3-4) He says (and this blows my mind), "I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has (actually) helped to spread the Good News. (God is great!) For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear." (12-14) God is great! I love working for him!

And then he says (this is even more mind blowing). He says, "I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. (God, give me the guts to keep on!) And I trust (I trust) that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die. (Because that's all that matters.) For to me, living means living for Christ (which is flat out cool), and dying is even better (because dying means living with Christ!). (20-22) Listen guys, happiness isn't the word for what's going on here. This goes way beyond happiness. This is chara, because of charis. This is grace, spilling over into joy. And that's why Paul got it done.

Same letter, chapter 3. He says, "Whatever happens, my dear brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord." (1) And he meant it, because he did it. And then he tells us how he did it. He tells us he used to live for the same junk we live for, till he realized that he was living for the wrong stuff. He says, "I once thought the things (I used to obsess over) were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when

compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake (he says) I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage (literally, dog poop), so that I could gain Christ and become one with him." (7-9)

One more place, chapter 4. This is his secret, I think. I love this part; it has been one of my life goals. He says, "Not that I was ever in need" ... Really? 195 lashes, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked - a lot. In jail, a lot - still there. Hungry, thirsty, cold. But he says, "Not that I was ever in need ... for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have." (Oh! I have learned to be content. That sounds almost un-American. He says,) I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. (Because ...) For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength." (4.11-13) Guys, this is Charis to chara; grace spilling over into joy. And Guys, I think 90% of our problems would fade if we could learn to obsess over grace like Paul did, and trust God like Paul did. And I think our church would go viral, if we could learn to fixate on grace, and trust God, like Paul did.

I'm telling you guys, these words have shaped one of my life goals. It hasn't been easy, because I am naturally grumpy and discontented) but I have tried to learn to be content - which is really hard for a Type A like me. Can I trust that God is enough? I mean, I can say it easily; but can I prove it by how I live? Can I trust that if I have everything, absolutely everything except God, I really have nothing at all? And can I trust that if I have God and virtually nothing else, that's enough? Can I be satisfied with a God who refuses to remove my problems, instead who gives me the strength to make it through them? Can I be satisfied with knowing that in this world I am going to mess up a lot, and suffer a lot, and lose a lot, but that in the end, the win I will experience will make all that junk seem like dog-poop. Here's the bottom line, guys. Here's what makes Paul tick; here's what makes him so incredible.

(1) Paul understood what God really promised. It is not about health, wealth, family, success, or any of that kind of stuff. It's about grace. And when you get grace, you get gratitude, and you get peace, and you get joy ... no matter what the world throws at you. He understood what God really promises.

(2) And Paul learned that God always, always, always keeps his promises. Guys, oxymorons, we miserable Christians, don't understand what God really promised, and we really don't trust God to keep his promises. We can do better.

(3) And Paul learned that God has a plan. And his plan is not to take you around the pain, his plan is to take you through it, and use it. His plan is to use it to transform you -,if you let him; and his plan is to use it to help you reach them - if you let him.

Guys, God doesn't promise any of us an easier life if we follow him. God won't prevent your mate from cheating on you; God won't keep your kids from getting sick; God won't keep you from a financial melt-down; God won't make everyone at work like you. In fact, sometimes being a Jesus follower often makes life harder.

But God will be there with you. He'll help you get through it. You'll never be alone. Never. And he'll use whatever you go through to make you better, if you let him.

- God will use your struggles to make you tougher. I'm telling you guys, the toughest Christians are never the ones who have had it the easiest.

- And God will use your struggles to break you. And believe it or not, there is nothing better than to be broken by God. (2 .7) Paul had some kind of thorn in his flesh; we don't know what it was. He calls it a "messenger from Satan" that tormented him. He prayed over and over again for God to take it away. And God says, (9) "Uh uh; my charis, my grace is all you need. My power (God says) works best in your weakness." So Paul says, "Now I boast about my weakness so that God's power can work through me." Because he knew that charis is the path to chara. Grace is the path to joy. So he says, (10) "That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses (that's so weird... and wonderful), and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. (And what is incredible is that he means it.) For (he says,) when I am weak, then I am strong. God will use your struggles to break you.

- And God will use your struggles to teach you to trust him - even when he doesn't deal with your pain as you ask.
- And God will use your struggles to reorder your priorities, to change the way you think. You will begin to realize that the things you obsess over can't deliver, and they are not really that important. And God will use your struggles to use you to reach someone else who shares your pain. God never wastes a hurt. Did you know that sometimes a Jesus follower stays faithful to his wife, not because his life will be easier, but because it will help his kids' be better? Did you know that sometimes we do the right thing on the job not because it will help us get ahead, but because it points someone else towards Jesus.

Guys, God doesn't promise to give us what we want. No ... because too often what we want is not what is best. Instead, like a perfect Father, he promises to give us what we need. And God always, always keeps his promises. God doesn't promise us happiness. Happiness is dictated by what happens to us. God does promise us joy. Because joy comes from what is in us. Joy happens when we are amazed by grace. You see, joy is a gift God gives when we trust him. Paul knew that - and it changed his life. And it still works that way.

Guys ... don't settle. Don't settle for the pursuit of happiness. It's too little. It's been months since I quoted C. S. Lewis. Here's what he says. He says, "Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." Don't settle for the pursuit of happiness; not only will it always be elusive, but you will miss the joy that comes when you focus on grace.

We're in chapter 30 of The Story: just one week left! We're calling this mini-series, "Grace Gone Viral." Because it did. Charis infected Paul, and he became a force of nature on a mission from God. But that wasn't enough for it to go viral. Others got it too. In the middle of their messes - and guys, their messes were like ours on steroids - in the middle of their messes they learned to trust God, and they began to taste this irrepressible joy. And it was infectious.

Others in the messes watched, and this grace pulled them in too. And grace went viral!

Guys, grace is still the most powerful force in the universe. Grace embraced still bleeds over into joy. We Jesus followers don't court pain, but we're not afraid of it - because our God is bigger, and what is on the other side is infinitely better. What a gift you can give yourself - to embrace grace. What a gift you can give to your family, to your wife, your husband, your kids, to your friends - even to your enemies. It's the gift that changes everything.

So ... if you are an oxymoron this morning - if you are a miserable Christian - it's time to learn to be content, it's time to quit ... pursuing happiness, and start obsessing over grace. Some of you guys aren't oxymorons, because you are not miserable Christians, you're just miserable. Well, this grace is for you too. In fact, it's the only way to experience the joy you were made for.