

The Story: Paul's Final Days

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[0 : 0 0] I'm going to start this morning, just as I did last week, with a little bit of a reflection to begin with. So I'm going to start by, this will be familiar to some of you, but perhaps not everyone.

It's called the Serenity Prayer. It was originally written by an American theologian named Reinhold Niebuhr, and he passed away in the early 70s.

But it's been used very widely by different denominations, different organizations. Alcoholics Anonymous actually adopted it at one point to use in their programs.

But I think it's very fitting and appropriate for us right now, because how is your serenity doing? How is your peace and trust doing in these times of the unknown?

I think we all realize that some of the health restrictions are being relaxed around North America, Canada, and the U.S.

[1 : 0 2] And even in your local community, you're probably experiencing some of that as well. But the reality is COVID-19 still exists. But beyond that, God is still in control.

So let me read this for us this morning. The Serenity Prayer. God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed. Courage to change the things which should be changed.

And the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time. Enjoying one moment at a time. Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.

Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is. Not as I would have it. Trusting that you will make all things right. If I surrender to your will.

So that I may be reasonably happy in this life. And supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen. Well, for those of you who know me, this will be old news.

[2 : 0 6] But I am, my name is Kent Dixon. And I'm the lead pastor of Bramard Baptist Church here in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. So for those of you who are tuning in online, welcome people from our church.

Welcome. Some of you I've spoken with. Some of you I've seen in virtual environments like this. But it's good to connect this morning. Even if for me, it's a one-way experience.

So I'm glad that you're here this morning. Feel free to comment. Obviously, I can't respond constantly. But blessings on you as we gather this morning to listen to God's word and reflect on his control in this situation.

Please check out the summary information below the video. You'll see some information there. Email addresses if you want to receive our church weekly e-newsletter and other messages from us.

And stay connected that way. Send an email to info at bramardbaptist.com to be plugged into that. If you have a prayer request that you'd like to send our way, please feel free to do so.

[3 : 10] Those are kept confidential amongst our prayer team. And that is prayer at bramardbaptist.com if you have a prayer request. Also, you can let us know if you'd like prayer more broadly communicated into our church online.

We'll do that as well. So I want to encourage you to tune in next week. Obviously, because we want you here and we want to connect with you.

But beyond that, yes, it's Mother's Day. But even beyond that, we've got a guest speaker next week. So I'm looking forward to that. Our church has a long history of supporting a camp called Gull Lake Center.

And that's the camp that our denomination supports. So at least once a week, we like to connect with the executive director or one of the management team from the camp.

Hear what they're doing and hear some other things that are going on. Have an opportunity to bless them and to connect with them. So obviously, in this current time, we're doing that in a virtual way.

[4 : 12] But next week, Steve Roadhouse. Steve is the executive director of Gull Lake Center. He's become a friend of mine. And Steve will be bringing an update on the camp and how they're functioning and doing things camp wise during the pandemic.

And he'll also update us on some other things that are going on at the camp. 2020 is the 100th year of the camp. So they had a big celebration planned.

And obviously, during the current time, that's not as easy to do. So Steve will give us an update on some of the things that they're doing in that way. He'll also be sharing a reflection with us as well.

So the way it's going to work is tune in just as you would with me live. And it will appear as though Steve is live. But Steve will be sending me a video presentation.

So I will be on here with you watching Steve's presentation and his sermon and so on and interacting with you a little bit that way. But please do tune in next week for Mother's Day and to hear from Steve Roadhouse.

[5 : 21] So this morning, we'll be celebrating communion together. And so I encourage you to take a moment, someone with you in your group as you're watching the service.

I encourage you to gather some elements that you can use to take communion later on when we get to that point. So don't feel pressure. Don't feel like you have to have Welch's grape juice or you have to have communion wine if that's something that you do.

Or you need to have wafers or perfectly measured cubes of bread or anything like that. This is a time for grace. So this is a time for you to just celebrate communion with what you have on hand.

So as we did last month when we did communion this way, just think ahead and prepare a little bit. So you can choose some bread or crackers, some juice or water or any sort of beverage that you have on hand.

And just have that close by for when we reach that point in the service. And I'll give you a little bit of warning at that point as well. This morning, we're continuing in our sermon series on the story.

[6 : 24] And our sermon is titled Paul's Final Days. Did you know that the lives of the Apostle Paul and the Emperor Nero overlapped?

You may have known that. You may not have known that. But they overlapped during the same period of time in the city of Rome. So these two famous historical figures lived in the same city.

But while Nero's name was making headlines and garnering widespread attention, Paul's wasn't. Or he was garnering attention for some of the less appealing reasons.

He was a troublemaker in the eyes of many people. So Ellen DeGeneres would have wanted to have Nero on her show. If Nero had had his own YouTube channel or an Instagram account or a Facebook account, he would have had millions of followers.

He was incredibly popular. He would have been invited to lavish dinners and public events. And by many measures, Nero was a hero. Paul, well, Paul was a bit of a zero.

[7 : 37] Biographers have suggested that Paul was stoop-shouldered, balding, crooked-nosed, a cloudy-eyed old man. And Paul kept talking about Jesus, this man Jesus, as if he were God.

And that landed him in prison in Rome. So if you asked anyone at that time, who will have the greatest and longest-lasting impact on the world?

Nero or Paul? Most people would have picked Nero. He was the safe bet at that time. Nero was married to a woman named Popeya Sabina.

Not a common name these days, but there you go. She was described as a blonde woman. She was a head-turning beauty who was said to have bathed in.

Now, I warned my daughter, Emily, about this. I said, stay tuned for the beauty tips from Popeya Sabina, Emperor Nero's wife.

[8 : 42] She was said to have bathed in donkey milk. Yes, donkey milk. Gross. So apparently 400 donkeys were kept on hand just for that purpose.

So that these donkeys could be milked for the Emperor's wife's baths. She would be dried with swan feathers. And massaged with crocodile mucus.

And now that's quite a beauty regimen. So it makes drinking a kale protein shake quite appealing, doesn't it? Yuck. But apparently Nero wanted his wife to have soft skin.

And what Nero wanted, he got. When he was 25, Nero essentially deified himself by having a 120-foot-tall statue of himself built in Rome.

People looked up to Nero, certainly in the case of that statue. And most looked down to Paul. Paul was an unremarkable man by society's standards.

[9 : 53] He was described a little bit, as I said before, as a small man, bow-legged, with a big nose. He had scruffy thick eyebrows that met in the middle.

So maybe Paul was the first unibrow, certainly in the New Testament. But his body was covered with scars due to beatings and being humiliated and attacked by people.

And we explored Paul's life and impact a bit in our sermon last week. But let's consider that this morning some more. As we learned, 13 or 14 of the New Testament books were written by Paul.

So it's no surprise that much of his dynamic life and deep personal struggles can be found chronicled in the New Testament. Now, Paul outlines some of the beatings and harsh treatments that he received for the cause of Christ in 2 Corinthians 11, verses 23 to 29.

2 Corinthians 11, 23 to 29. And you can look that up. Paul stood firm in his faith, and he proclaimed the message of Jesus Christ, even though he was almost constantly in very real physical danger.

[11 : 10] We also learned through the New Testament that Paul traveled extensively. And over the course of his ministry, he walked through many of the major cities of the known Roman world.

And that would have been no small feat at that time. He didn't take Uber. He didn't take a taxi. He didn't ride a bike. He didn't fly, certainly.

So he walked. So he walked many, many, many, many, likely hundreds of miles in his travels. And on his ministry. We also learned about Paul's work ethic in the New Testament.

He worked as a tent maker in the mornings. And then he spoke about Jesus Christ and the gospel for several hours every day in the afternoon, except for the Sabbath.

So when you think about the books of the New Testament now, do you have a sense that the authors wrote from comfortable workspaces? So if people are listening or watching this morning and you're working from home, that's your normal right now.

[12 : 13] You're probably working at a desk. You're probably working where you have some control over the climate. You're not getting rained on. You're not facing heat and struggle and all of those things.

But that's not what the conditions were like for a lot of the New Testament authors. Paul, in fact, wrote several of his books while he sat in prison.

And those words that he wrote during his time in prison are still treasured to this day. Paul was both a prophet and a pastor.

And even to the very end, he never got over the sense of wonder that he gained having met Jesus Christ. The fact that Jesus had changed him.

The fact that Jesus had commissioned him personally to be his agent in the world. And throughout Paul's writing, we can see that he was constantly a spokesperson for God's grace.

[13 : 14] He felt called to be a messenger of that grace. And it even seemed in many ways, if you look at his writing, one of Paul's favorite words is grace.

I think one of the most powerful testimonies of Paul's life was his ability to both endure and persevere, often under nearly insurmountable obstacles.

And thankfully, Paul led us in a little bit on his secret. He led us in on his ability to face, to both endure and persevere under obstacles.

His ability to face severe challenges of his life when he was rejected and often even left for dead. And so perhaps this morning, many of you who are watching or listening, maybe you've been rejected by your families or friends for following Jesus.

Perhaps you have friends or family members who think that your choice to follow Jesus is misplaced, deluded, obsolete, or even downright crazy.

[14 : 24] We all have storms that we're facing in our lives. Now, if you live in central Alberta, Canada, we're about to get a storm later this afternoon that's supposed to last all day tomorrow.

So there's a literal storm. But we're all facing storms in our lives. Many of us right now due to COVID-19 and the pandemic. We're facing relational storms, either that existed, broken relationships before the pandemic, or certainly stress and separation that's happened as a result of the pandemic.

We're facing financial challenges. Many of you who are watching or listening have had your jobs suspended, have been laid off, have had your hours reduced. We have government funding and support that's available, and considerable numbers of people are tapping into that support.

But the reality is we are affected and our lives are changed by our financial circumstances. Or perhaps we even have personal circumstances. I mentioned a few weeks ago that a friend of mine, a childhood friend of mine, passed away suddenly a few weeks ago.

And so his mother is struggling with not only the loss of her son, but the reality of not being able to give him a memorial service or a proper burial or gather people together in the way that she'd like.

[15 : 45] And that's a reality for many people that I know who have lost loved ones during this time. But while Paul was in prison in Rome, he wrote to Timothy, a young man he was mentoring in ministry at that time.

And the Bible says in 2 Timothy 1, 8 to 12, I'll read that for us this morning. 2 Timothy 1, 8 to 12. So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me, his prisoner.

Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel by the power of God. He has saved us and called us to a holy life, not because of anything we have done, but because of his own purpose and grace.

There's that G word. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time. But it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

And of this gospel, I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.

[17 : 14] So as we hear his words here, we recognize that Paul had firmly anchored his life to a hope that was literally out of this world.

And in that hope, he was able to look beyond his circumstances, beyond his suffering, beyond his struggles, as he entrusted his life and his ultimate destiny into the hands of God.

Can you identify with Paul in this? I know I can. So many times in our lives, and perhaps now more than ever, we feel like nothing in life is going right.

As I touched on early in the serenity prayer, it's yielding these things that are out of our control. That can be very hard. But the same hope in Jesus Christ that was available to Paul is available to you as well.

That same hope, that same grace, that relationship with Jesus Christ can be your anchor in the storms of life, just as it was for Paul.

[18 : 23] Let's reflect back on Nero and Paul for a minute, because I think we'd all agree that Paul's life ended well. Nero's not so much.

So first, Paul.

Paul's life, friends, began on that day. And not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. Paul's new life, friends, began on that road to Damascus.

It began there, and it ended on a chopping block in a prison cell in Rome. At the age of 29, Nero was lonely and paranoid.

His second wife had killed his first wife, and Nero kicked his pregnant second wife, and she died. Then four years after Paul died, Nero took his own life.

[19 : 53] Nero was ultimately no hero. And his legacy is a shining example to this day of what not to do, how not to rule, how not to lead.

Paul's example, however, his legacy, his writing, still impacts us and changes lives to this day.

It's probably not surprising to you, there are no St. Nero cathedrals. People do not generally name their sons Nero.

But there are lots of people around who are named Paul. Maybe you've never thought of this before. There are lots of Paulines as well. Who are the real difference makers in this world?

Not the spotlight-seeking, attention-craving celebrities that we love to follow. But folks, it's the ultimate, it's the ordinary folks, the ordinary Pauls and Paulines.

[21 : 01] The church who are making a difference and are called to make a difference for all eternity. Only the church has been given the story of grace.

So my questions for you this morning are, are you fighting the good fight? Are you finishing the course?

And are you running the race that has been set before you by Christ Jesus? May you be encouraged by God's grace freely given to you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Now this morning as we celebrate communion together, we remember in a way that Jesus called us to do. When we remember broken, damaged, dismembered aspects of our past lives are put together again.

Mind, body, and soul in the present tense enjoy wholeness again. And helplessness in the face of the unknown, in the unknown future, gives way to resurrection hope.

[22 : 22] As we prepare to celebrate communion together this morning, I'm going to begin with these words of approach. And as you listen, feel free to gather those elements that I mentioned earlier.

We gather at this table to celebrate life. The life of God in the world. Made flesh and blood in Jesus. Embodied in us.

We come to remember the body that was broken. The hands that touched the untouchable. Healed the hurting and did no violence.

The feet that got dusty along city streets and at the lake shore. The arms that welcomed the stranger and embraced the outcast. The legs that entered homes and synagogues and danced at celebrations.

The eyes that blazed at injustice. Knew how to cry and saw the potential in everyone. The belly that shared table with unexpected people and shook with laughter.

[23 : 31] The lips that wove stories and painted pictures of a new community and a better world. This blessed body that was broken, abused and rejected.

We come to remember. For we are called to be the body of Christ. As you risen Christ remember our lives.

So we remember you. And not only at this table but in our lives together. May we embody your kingdom and remember your life in the world.

And now I'll share some words of thanksgiving. Let's pray. Oh God we give thanks for this bread and cup. A timeless reminder of the flesh and blood life of Jesus.

Broken, rejected yet unstoppable. In Christ we see a life that could not be ended by death. A purpose that could not be silenced by the forces of violence.

[24 : 36] A desire deep within you for the transformation of the world. As we eat the bread and drink the cup this morning. We thank you for the acceptance and tenderness.

With which you have transformed our shame into dignity. And loved us into life. We thank you for cherishing the potential in us.

And for calling us to be partners in your vision for this world. As we eat the bread and drink the cup. We call on your spirit to come alongside us.

So that together in the company of your spirit. We may give ourselves afresh to the task of remembering you. Of being the body of Christ.

Of living your life in this world. Amen. Now please gather your bread or crackers. This broken bread we share is the body of Christ.

[25 : 37] It is a sign of all that we live and risk together as the community of Christ. Let all who seek Christ take and eat.

Now please gather your juice or water. This cup we drink together is the wine of the kingdom of God. The sign of God's undertaking for the life of the world.

Let all who seek Christ take and drink. Let's pray. Father God, we have taken the bread and cup into our bodies.

Let's pray.

Christ has remembered us. May we remember Christ. Amen. As we close our service this morning, I think it's fitting that our benediction comes in the words of the Apostle Paul himself.

[27 : 02] In Philippians 4 verse 7. May the peace of God which transcends all understanding. Guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

My friends, don't be afraid in the shadow of the unknown. Because the light of Christ will guide you. Go in peace and have a great week.

Go in peace. Go in peace and have a great week. Let's go in peace.