

Good morning, church. We are glad to have you here with us on this sunny/rainy/cloudy morning. If you've been here over the past three weeks you'll know that today is our fourth and final message in our series: broken beginnings and kingdom conclusions. We've talked throughout this series about the realities and manifestations of brokenness: doubt, fear, failure, loss, grief, pain/...and we have talked about the thread of hope—that is, God's grace—that helps us to move forward from brokenness into a place of healing, and ultimately a conclusion that serves and embodies the kingdom of heaven. We've talked through this process in a very linear way, until now—brokenness leads to God's grace, mercy, and healing, and a final kingdom conclusion. But the truth of the matter is that life events never seem to play out quite so neatly. In the midst of healing we are often faced with more brokenness, in the midst of our deepest pain we may just catch a glimpse of hope. Sometimes the storms of life come back to back in relentless waves and never seem to let up enough for us to even begin on the healing journey. You know that they say—when it rains, it pours.

This week's message is focused around the life and ministry of the apostle Paul, the man who is responsible for much of the writings of the New Testament, a saint, and a forefather of the Christian faith. Paul's life was not easy—both before he came to know Jesus, and after he faced tremendous struggle, and trial after trial. And when we look at his story, it's easy to see that brokenness is an ongoing adversity that we each must

face throughout life—it is not a linear process, nor is it a one-time experience. That's going to be our focus today—that life is not about the calm before—or after—the storm, but rather about the calm in between the many, many storms we are sure to face.

As we begin, I'd like to start with a word of prayer.

*We are gathered here today, Lord God as your people, to offer you our sacrifice of prayer and worship. We come from different walks of life, each with different battles we've faced; some of us have walked with you for many years, others are just starting their journey; some of us are filled with joy, others heavy with burdens and worries. Let us remember that you love us in equal measure. You pour your blessings out on us all equally. You gave us your Son, that we may be one with You again. Bless this time we have together this morning in worship and in Your word. In Jesus name, AMEN.*

Our Scripture today comes from Acts 9:1-9, and 19-22, as well as 1 Cor 11:1-2: "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem."<sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his

journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” <sup>5</sup> “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. <sup>6</sup> “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” <sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Acts 9:19-22 <sup>19b</sup> Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. <sup>20</sup> At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>21</sup> All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” <sup>22</sup> Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

1 Cor 11:1-2 <sup>1</sup> Follow my example, as I follow the example of

Christ. <sup>2</sup> I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you.

Looking at these passages out of context, it would be easy to assume that Paul faced brokenness—a Pharisaical Jew who persecuted the church violently, who is converted (which might represent that healing pieces we’ve been talking about), who’s ultimate Kingdom Conclusion is that of sainthood, New Testament writings, and a great Christian faith that is so beautifully perfect he challenges other Christians to imitate him in the ways that he imitates Christ.

But that’s not the full story—not even close, in fact. Let me outline a bit of what Paul went through in his life and ministry for a moment....

This is a list that still falls short of all he suffered. It comes from 2 Corinthians 11:23-33 which means it was ultimately written with close to 1/3 of his ministry still to go:

in labors more abundant; in stripes above measure; in prisons more frequently; faced death often; from the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one; three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in

journeys often; in perils of waters; in perils of robbers; in perils of my own countrymen; in perils of the Gentiles; in perils in the city; in perils in the wilderness; in perils in the sea; in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil; in sleeplessness often; in hunger and thirst; in often fastings; in cold and nakedness; besides the other things, what comes upon me daily my deep concern for all the churches;

There is more where that came from. ; Given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him (2 Corinthians 12:7). ; Abandoned by all his friends while imprisoned (2 Timothy 1:15).; Despaired even of life (2 Corinthians 1:8).

Not exactly a lifestyle of glamour. Not a lifestyle free from suffering, or pain, or brokenness. Even though Paul experiences healing from the brutal lifestyle of his past where he persecuted the Jews, and was freed from those chains, he still had to endure more. God wove a beautiful new story for Paul out of his broken beginning but did not leave the next chapters of that story free from pain.

Following Jesus demands that we recognize that the same is true for us. Matthew 16:24 reads, "Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me". It's easy to crave comfort, and fall into those patterns and pitfalls of "easy living", to idolize it. The truth is, we were meant to crave it! However, we weren't meant to find it in life apart from

God, but we were always meant to find peace and comfort in Jesus. In John 16:33, Jesus tells us, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world". It's incredible! Jesus has OVERCOME! We are promised that we can find peace in Him no matter the circumstance. But of course, when we say "no matter the circumstance", that means that there's going to be some difficult circumstances in there.

One verse that really helps us make sense of this is Jeremiah 29:11. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future". This is one of those verses that people seem to really misunderstand. People seem to think that it means "here's some smooth sailing for you for the rest of your life", but the fact is, God never promises that to us. This verse in Jeremiah is written as part of a letter to the Jews in exile. Exile. As in, kicked out of your home, your own country, and forced to live amongst a strange people. This verse was written during dire circumstance! What God is promising here is this: "you may be in a broken, awful situation now, but I am going to be healing you from this continually, and will do so for every broken circumstance you face after".

Here's the truth, church: Life is full of give and take, good and bad, brokenness and healing. There's an ebb and a flow, like

the waves of the ocean, that ultimately cannot be controlled or anticipated by any one of us. And when those storms of life do begin to pick up, and the thunder rolls, lightning strikes, and rain drives harder than we knew it could... when the wind whips the waves around us into a frenzy and we don't know any longer which way is up, and it feels like every moment is just a matter of desperately trying to catch our breath, it's hard to think that somewhere along the line, there will be another storm. And when we maybe begin to make sense of the storm that we are in now, it can change again—next time we might face a hurricane, or a two-minute storm that blows through before we even really know what's hit us. Life is full of the unexpected. Full of that ebb and flow that we cannot predict.

So what do we do when the storms of life threaten to pull us under? What can we do when the waves of life slam us into rocks off the coast, sweep our feet out from under us, and overwhelm us entirely? What did Paul do? He left the situations in the scarred hands of our savior. And we should too—when the storm threatens to overcome us... well, we cling to Jesus.

Mark 4:37-41

A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. 38 Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked

the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Christ is our hope, our anchor, and the One who calms the storm. We sang (will sing?) a song this morning that reminds us that the waves and wind still know his name! The storms of life—metaphorical and real—are never too much for our God! Christ was human, he lived a life full of his own storms; he faced darkness, he faced the ebb and the flow, and the brokenness of feeling like he was drowning in it all. Jesus had to leave to pray. He had to stop in Gethsemane. He had to face the cross, and his death.

If our Lord knows what it is to face the storms of life, and to still the raging seas, we need to do our best to patiently wait on him to rescue us. We need to call on him, and know that he will come for us, even in the midst of the storm he will come, ready to rescue us, standing atop the waves with his hand extended, calling us out upon the water with him. We know that God is faithful. He has been since day one, and always will be.

When we talk about Christ in the storms of our life, we can hold onto hope because nothing is too great for him. Even at our most desperate, we know he is not overcome. And we can rejoice in that, despite our brokenness.

A favorite story of mine that illustrates this is the one behind the hymn "It Is Well."

Horatio G. Spafford was a successful lawyer and businessman in Chicago with a lovely family - a wife, Anna, and originally five children. However, their young son died with pneumonia in 1871, and in that same year, much of their business was lost in the great Chicago fire. Yet, God in His mercy and kindness allowed the business to flourish once more.

In the midst of this tragedy the family planned a trip to Europe for a much needed vacation, and the chance to help Spafford's friends D.L. Moody and Ira Sankey in a campaign they were preaching in England.

On Nov. 22, 1873, the French ocean liner, Ville du Havre was crossing the Atlantic from the U.S. to Europe with 313 passengers on board. Among the passengers were Mrs. Spafford and their four daughters. Although Mr. Spafford had planned to go with his family, he found it necessary to stay in

Chicago to help solve an unexpected business problem. He told his wife he would join her and their children in Europe a few days later. His plan was to take another ship.

That November 22 the ship was gliding on a smooth sea in the early hours when it was struck by a powerful, iron-hulled ship, the Lochearn. Suddenly, all of those on board were in grave danger. Anna hurriedly brought her four children to the deck. She knelt there with Annie, Margaret Lee, Bessie and Tanetta and prayed that God would spare them if that could be His will, or to make them willing to endure whatever awaited them. Within approximately 12 minutes, the Ville du Havre slipped beneath the dark, frigid waters of the Atlantic, carrying with it 226 of the passengers including the four Spafford children.

Later, a sailor, rowing a small boat over the spot where the ship went down, spotted a woman floating on a piece of the wreckage. It was Anna, still barely alive. He pulled her into the boat and they were picked up by another large vessel which, nine days later, landed them in Cardiff, Wales. From there she wired her husband a message which said only, "Saved alone, what shall I do?" Mr. Spafford later framed the telegram and placed it in his office.

Shortly after hearing from his wife, Mr. Spafford booked passage on the next available ship and left to join his grieving wife. With the ship about four days out, on a cold December night, the captain called Spafford to his cabin and said “I believe we are now passing over the place where the Ville Du Havre went down.”

Spafford went to his cabin but found it hard to sleep. He said to himself “It is well; the will of God be done.” And, according to Bertha Spafford Vester, a daughter born after the tragedy, Spafford wrote “It Is Well With My Soul” while on this journey.

When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll,

Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,

It is well, it is well with my soul.

And those words ring of truth even still today... Because even though storms will come—and they will come time and time again, even when its most inconvenient—we know that there will always be that promised calm in between. That space where the clouds die down, the wind is calm, and the waves no longer threaten to overcome us. That space when we are so often greeted with a rainbow—a sign of God’s eternal covenant to protect us and bring us out of the storm. It

reminds us that God has not left us, nor forsaken us. Jesus is with us every step of the way.

I imagine this is what Paul must have felt like every time one of his great sufferings past. When he was able to write to his friends, his Christian family, and tell them “imitate me as I imitate Christ.” I imagine that that was one of those days for him where the sun shone down warmly on his skin, and the waves of life lapped gently and steadily at his feet. I imagine that’s when Paul could see clearly the ultimate Kingdom Conclusion: Christ returning to make all things new.

Charles Spurgeon summed it up in this way, church: “I have learned to kiss the wave that slams me against the Rock of Ages.”

So if there’s one thing we want you to take away from this series, Church—when we’ve spent so much time talking about brokenness, healing, and God’s perfect kingdom conclusion... its this: Hold on to your hope in Jesus. Though the storms come and go, though you may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, fear no evil, for Christ is with you. Hold onto him as he takes you through each point of brokenness towards the final Kingdom Conclusion of Christs return & triumph.

As we close, I'd like us all to pray the Lord's Prayer together, as it is on the screen.

*Our Father in Heaven,*

*Make your name Holy*

*Your kingdom come, your will be done*

*On earth as it is in heaven*

*Give us this day, our daily bread*

*And forgive us our sins*

*As we forgive those who sin against us*

*Lead us not into temptation*

*But deliver us from evil*

*For yours is the kingdom*

*The power and the glory forever Amen.*