

Riding the Roller Coaster of Faith

Adapted from a sermon by Bruce Goettsche @ Sermon Central.com

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Each year when Palm Sunday arrives, we focus in particular on Jesus as he enters the last week of his passionate life. A week that begins with him welcomed into Jerusalem as a conquering king and ends with him executed outside the city as a common criminal. This is where our thinking should be, as we deeply remember His sacred life given for our redemption so that we might truly have the forgiveness and life he offers us.

On this Palm Sunday, in view of the troubled times through which we are all passing, let's take a slightly different perspective on the story of Jesus and his disciples, on Jesus and us. It will eventually come back to where it should – focused on God's love – but for today, let's think about what this idea of following Jesus was like for his disciples.



In those three years that the disciples got to know him, as they walked and talked with Jesus, as they witnessed miracle after miracle, they had this building sense of anticipation that they were in on the ground floor of something great; that they too would be great.

But near the end of those three years Jesus began to confuse them and cause them question this path they were following with stories of why he must go to Jerusalem and die. Because of these stories, the adoring crowds dwindled away and many disciples stopped following after him.

Then there was the triumphal parade and the streets lined with cheering people as Jesus came into Jerusalem. It must have made the disciples feel that the moment they had been waiting for had arrived. Everything would work out after all and Jesus would soon take his rightful place as the new King of Israel.

It was a joyous heady week as Jesus cleared the temple of the tradesmen and publicly took on the corrupt priests – yes this was a great time to be a disciple.

The celebration of Passover that Thursday evening must have felt like a special time. Passover was a family celebration. Sitting at table with him the disciples knew that they were now considered "family" by Jesus.

But during the supper there were again the troubling words of betrayal, abandonment, and death.

Following the supper was a refreshing retreat to the garden where they could sleep off a full meal in the cool a spring night.

Why then was Jesus away by himself crying and in anguished prayer urging them to stay awake and watch – for what?

This was followed by an attack of the soldiers with the violent arrest of Jesus as the disciples fled into the darkness.



There was the unbelievable mock trial, crowds now screaming for Jesus' death, and his tortuous execution as a criminal. Now, themselves being sought like criminals, the disciples huddled in some back room trying to deal with their grief, numbness, confusion, and fear.

But then this group of devastated disciples were filled with new hope as a miraculously restored to life Jesus once again walked with them and comforted them.

A month later, after Jesus' ascension from the earth, once again the disciples felt left alone and directionless; told only to go back to Jerusalem and wait.



Then just 10 days after he had left them, the disciples were visited by his empowering Holy Spirit; they felt invincible. Thousands were coming to faith every single day. The priests were once again rendered powerless, mute, as Jerusalem was finally coming to believe and life seemed good once again.

After many years there arose a devastating persecution of the church, dear friends, long-time followers of Jesus were murdered in the streets; believers fled Jerusalem in fear of their lives and the disciples were scattered to the corners of the Roman world.

Do you see a pattern here?

One day things were fine, the next day things were difficult. There were times of tremendous victory followed by times of utter defeat. Joy and sorrow mixed together. Times of feeling very close to God were followed by times when God felt far away.

The best way to describe the disciple's life of following Jesus is to liken it to a roller coaster ride. There were times when they felt invincible and were climbing the mountain of intimacy when suddenly they were plunged into confusion and fear only to roll and twist and rise to fall again.

Does this seem similar to the way your life has been going?

Days of victory followed by days of defeat, the highs that inevitably seem to be followed by struggle. Does not the roller coaster life of the disciples reflect an all too familiar pattern in your life?

From this simple observation let us take home three simple truths from today.

1. Our rollercoaster life and faith seems to be the normal Christian experience
2. So we must trust God's promise of provision and protection rather than our current feelings.
3. And once you have thus anchored your faith – the roller coaster ride can be quite exhilarating.

OUR ROLLER COASTER LIFE IS NORMAL

Have you ever picked up a brochure of some idyllic vacation spot only to find that the place advertised is nothing like the brochure? I remember once we had booked a week at a resort that looked fantastic on paper. We looked forward to a relaxing atmosphere with beautiful rooms and uncrowded beaches. However, when we arrived the hotel was a lot older than it had looked in the pictures. The rooms felt worn out and smelled of mildew while the beach photos had been angled so that you wouldn't see the new construction crowding close to the sand. It was disappointing to say the least.

The brochure that is often presented about Christianity can be just as disappointing.

When we are told about the Christian life we are told about the victories, the wonderful intimacy that one can experience with God and that incredible strength that enables us to overcome anything. We sign up and for awhile we know the heady feeling of peace, joy and victory until we hit a pothole in the roadway of faith. Difficulties come along and we start to wonder what happened. We wonder if we are "doing something wrong." We begin to think that our faith must be deficient. Problems in life must mean that we are being punished for our sin.

That's not generally the case. The truth is that the roller coaster is a normal, perhaps even a necessary part of the Christian life.

It is easy to trust God when everything is going well, but it is also easy to become lazy and superficial. The dips of life and hard experiences help us to develop roots. Plants need some dry times to force their roots down deep into the ground looking for water. Dry and difficult times come to our lives in order to help us grow strong as well.

Every time I counsel with a couple approaching marriage I try to help them understand that tough times come to every marriage. There are moments when you begin to wonder how life would have been different had you married someone else. I want every young couple to realize when these thoughts come to mind that they are not

failures. They have not made some terrible mistake. They are going through the normal process of growing from infatuation into a much deeper love. Knowing this ahead of time helps them not to panic when it happens.

In the same way it is helpful to realize that the roller coaster is normal in the life of faith. Down and difficult times do not mean God has abandoned you, or that you are deficient in your faith. There is no need to panic . . . keep on trusting.

It is so important that we understand this both for ourselves and also for our brothers and sisters in faith. Tough times don't necessarily mean that a Christian is doing something wrong or is faltering in their faith. When you are in a good area of your life but they are not, it doesn't mean that they need to be "more like you". It just means that you are in different spots of the journey. Which brings up the second truth.

WE MUST TRUST GOD'S PROMISES RATHER THAN OUR FEELINGS

Once we understand the roller coaster effect we should then realize that our emotions are a poor measure of our relationship with God and the quality of our faith. Our experiences and our feelings about those experiences are unpredictable. One moment we're up, the next we're down. They are unreliable. The only true measure of faith and experience is God's Word. Scripture tells us that...

all things work together for good
for those who love God, who are
called according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28

God does not promise to only bring us good situations, but God does promise to bring good out of all the situations we face. This is the correct understanding of this often misquoted verse.

- Our emotions might suggest that God has deserted us but God has told us that He will never leave us or forsake us. (Hebrews 13:5)
- We may feel that we are facing a situation that we cannot handle, but the Bible tells us that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13)
- When we feel strong and invincible, the Bible warns us to pay attention lest we fall (1 Corinthians 10:12).
- We may feel that we are not "good enough" but the Bible tells us that we are "saved by grace and not by works" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

- Our feelings are blown and tossed by the seas of circumstance. But God's Word is an anchor that holds solid (Hebrews 6:19).

This principle is true for all kinds of situations.

- You may be overwhelmed by your needs and feel you need to take matters into your own hands to get what you want, but the Bible tells you to trust Him and He will supply all your needs (Philippians 4:19).
- You may feel that you have "fallen out of love" but the Bible tells you that you are to give yourself to your spouse with the same kind of commitment that God has given himself to us. Love is a decision more than an emotion (Ephesians 5:21-33).
- You may feel that you have really messed things up and that you have lost your salvation, but God says that "*no one can ever snatch you from His hand.*" (John 10:28-29).
- You may find yourself fascinated by some of the "new spirituality", but God says all these pseudo-religions which say *don't handle, don't taste, don't touch ... which have the appearance of wisdom* but are of no value in promoting true holiness (Colossians 2:21-23).
- You may feel completely deserted and alone, but God says, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" (Hebrews 13:5-6)
- You may feel that you have "every right to be happy" even if it means ignoring God's truth, but God tells you that you will never have true happiness, true rest, apart from Him (Matthew 11:28-30).

Having heard all this, we need to draw an obvious implication.

We can't trust God's Word unless we KNOW God's Word.

God's Word is our anchor, our map, our light for the darkness. God's Word gives wisdom, strength, and direction (Psalm 119:9-11). Satan will do anything to keep us from God's Word. *We have been warned that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but spiritual forces of evil:* which is why we need to take up the shield of faith, the helmet salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, have our feet made ready to take the Good news of the Gospel wherever God takes us; and most importantly we need to *take up the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God* (Ephesians 6:11-18).

Satan does not want you to know God's word.

- He'll try to get us to resist making time for Bible reading, putting it off like we do other onerous obligations.
- He'll try to convince us that we aren't smart enough to understand the Bible.
- Or he'll whisper that we already know what the Bible says,

- Or that there will always be a better time "later" to read.
- He'll suggest that we substitute other reading for the Bible.

The Devil will always attempt to turn us from God's Word. It is the only reliable guide that we have. God's Word is the only way to maintain our balance in the ups and downs of life (James 4:7).

Here's some very practical suggestions to help strengthen your Biblical literacy and reliance.

- Find yourself a modern translation of the Bible so you can understand it
- Certainly now like never before, you have the time to read your Bible systematically: don't just look up select verses, read through an entire book of the Bible at a time

Read the Bible with your family!

Not too long ago in American history, every Christian family had a period of every day known as "the family altar," a time where everyone gathered to hear God's word read aloud and to share in prayers. Perhaps these days of self-quarantine can help both husband and wife, parents and children, start a new tradition of reading the bible together.

Those of you who have the text of my sermon in your hands, will notice that every time I quoted a scripture I included the address so that you might look up and read that scripture for yourself. That was intentional, as I hope you will return to this message and return to your Bibles multiple times as you face these upcoming days of loneliness, isolation and frustration.

- IF you don't know where to start, start with Jesus. Start with the Gospel of John which was written to help you get to know Jesus.
- Look for the teachable principle in every passage that you read. Most Biblical stories and were designed to teach us something. Learn to ask, "*what is it that God wants me to learn*". Move beyond just gaining information to applying it in your life.
- Strive to memorize one verse a week, then review it often. Go back to that verse every week. Repeat it and think on what it means for your life. If you think you are too old to memorize then keep a journal of favorite passages; write down what you learned from each passage.

- Learn from the insights of others . . . but don't substitute those insights for your personal study.
- Finally, share what you learn with others.

Which brings us to the last truth.

**IF YOUR FAITH IS WELL ANCHORED,
THE ROLLER COASTER CAN BE EXHILARATING!**

As a matter of truth in advertising: I am no longer a roller coaster fanatic. There was a time in my youth when I considered such rides fun. Then came a day when my stomach refused to get off the ride after it finished and I knew my coaster days were done.

Now, I prefer the steady and stable to the wild and crazy. And as the coasters get more radical and scary you wonder why anyone would want to ride them.

There are a couple of reasons people ride roller coasters. First, some people are just nuts! Most aren't. You get on the roller coaster because you trust the manufacturer. You know that amusement rides are very carefully regulated. Safety is the number one priority. You believe that no matter how wild the ride feels, you will be safe because the manufacturer built the ride with safety as a first priority.

Second, you trust the restraints, the protection that is provided. You trust the harness or the bar that holds you in. That's always the first thing I check when I get onto one of these rides. I want to make sure my harness is fastened securely. When you know you have nothing to worry about you can enjoy the ride.

In like fashion the roller coaster of faith if not enjoyable, can be taken in stride when we can trust the Lord and the protections he has put in place for us. He wants to bless us and not curse us. God is pursuing our good and will not allow anything into the life of a believer that is not intended to foster our growth and prepare us for eternity.

I'm not saying that things still don't hurt. At times they do.
I'm not saying we won't be disappointed. We will.
I'm not saying that we won't at times be confused. We probably will be.
But in the midst of all of this we know that a Sovereign hand is leading us to our final destination. The ride may be wild but the end is sure and when we are confident of the end we can boldly face the journey.

God has promised that He will get us home (John 14:1-3).
He has given us His Word as a restraint to protect us (Psalm 119:105).
He has given us His Holy Spirit to preserve us (Ephesians 1:13).

He has given us the fellowship of believers to encourage us (Hebrews 10:24-25).

God has given us teachers to guide us, brothers and sisters to help and strengthen us in times of trial. We are well protected but we must take advantage of those protections. All the restraints on a ride are useless if they are not fastened.

If we remember who created our life, who then sought us out and redeemed us, and we trust the tools He has given us, then we can face whatever ride life throws at us. We can thrill at the good times and we can enjoy watching God at work in the tough times. If we have the right perspective we will look for the positive rather than the negative. A wise saying is that ***Happiness is not a station you arrive at, it is a way of traveling.*** That is especially true for us who travel with Christ Jesus our savior. He remains our good shepherd guarding and guiding through both green pastures and dark valleys.

So here is your take home for this Palm Sunday.

Where are you on the roller coaster of life at this moment?

Are you on a peak and enjoying all the good things that surround you? Good for you! Rejoice in God's goodness to you.

Maybe you are going through a desert time. Your faith feels lifeless and dead. You pray but you feel nothing, you read but nothing seems to be getting through. Trust His faithfulness friend. He has not abandoned you even if He remains silent. Remember that **teachers never talk when they are giving you a test.** Keep doing what is right. Keep moving forward and the darkness will eventually give way to light. He has promised and His promise is sure. Celebrate God's faithfulness.

Certainly this is a lonely time for most of us, maybe it is also a painful time. The world seems to be crashing down around you. You may be in the midst of a fierce storm and you are wondering if you will survive. Let me share with you some wisdom from author Max Lucado.

He once lived on a houseboat in Miami, with several other bachelors when Hurricane David was heading toward town. The single guys staying on the boat wondered how best to protect their fragile home. In the midst of their bewilderment a man named Phil gave them great advice,

Tie her to land and you'll regret it. Phil said, those trees are gonna get eaten by the 'cane. Your only hope is to anchor deep," He then instructed them to move to deep water, place four anchors in four different locations, leave the rope slack, and pray for the best.

That is good advice: **anchor deep, friend**. Tie your hopes and confidence not to the surface things like emotions, circumstances and the approval and gimmicks of men. Rather, drop your anchor and tie your hopes to the firm foundation of God's Word, God's Character, God's Power, and God's Track-record. He will see you through the storms if you let go of the foolish things of the world and cling only to Him.

The disciples were on quite a wild emotional ride during the weeks before and after that first Palm Sunday. They didn't enjoy it at the time, but as they looked back they were able to see that the lowest times were blessed times. That which broke their heart, actually saved their soul. The very experiences that they sensed were destroying them, were actually the experiences God was using to transform them.

So wherever you are on the roller coaster of faith, remember the promises of the one who created the very life we are living. Remember His goodness. Trust His wisdom. Rely on His strength. Throw your hands up in the air and enjoy the ride.

Let's pray about this.