

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermon series titled, □ “The Church that Changed the World.” It is a study through the New Testament book of Acts.

Our text for today is □ Acts 22:22-30. From this text, we are going to learn something about disappointment and failure.

We all face disappointment and failure. And it is particularly hard to take when you have given something your best shot, when you have done what you believed was right before God, when you had good and godly intentions, but the outcome is not what you had hoped.

Maybe you are a parent who has worked hard to raise your children right. But they keep making poor choices, and you feel like a failure, and you’re wondering where you went wrong.

Maybe you agreed to lead a small group at Moon Valley. It was out of your comfort zone. It was a significant commitment of your time. You diligently planned for the group. And then nobody showed up. And you’re left wondering: “Is it me? Is something wrong with me?”

Maybe you mustered the courage to invite someone to church or to simply share your story of how Jesus has changed your life. You prayed about it, approached it with sensitivity and humility, and hoped for a favorable response. But not only was there no interest, it was met with an awkward coolness.

Representing Jesus well is not always easy, and it is not getting any easier.

I read an article last week in which the writer and scholar, Chrissy Stoop argued vehemently against any attempt by Christians to lead non-Christians to faith in Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Stoop asserts that such evangelizing is never okay, describing it with words like obnoxious, distasteful, unethical, objectifying, manipulative, supremacist, abusive, harmful, and an act of Christian privilege and domination in which believers oppressively assert their superiority over others.

Stoop's argument is not just that *some* evangelistic efforts can be and have been obnoxious, distasteful, etc.—which, of course, is sadly true. I have no doubt that, in some cases, efforts to evangelize have indeed been needlessly offensive.

But Stoop's argument goes further, contending that all Christian evangelism is inherently and invariably wrong no matter how it's done.

Stoop stops short of suggesting evangelism should be illegal, but she does advocate silencing evangelism by stigmatizing it.

The author is a self-described ex-evangelical, known colloquially as an exvie. Stoop holds a Ph.D. in modern Russia history from Stanford, is a Senior Research Associate with the University of Innsbruck, and in 2019, came out as a transgender woman.

Stoop may not yet represent mainstream America, but I think it is safe to say Stoop's views are becoming more and more common.

This may seem unprecedented, and in American history, it may be. But in world history, this is nothing new. In fact, the apostle Paul faced similar opposition.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://religiondispatches.org/is-proselytizing-ever-okay-are-we-all-proselytizing-all-the-time/>

You may recall that, leading up to our biblical text for today, Paul had been misjudged as anti-Jewish and wrongly accused of taking Gentiles into the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. An angry Jewish mob in Jerusalem had been ready to tear Paul apart when the Roman tribune stepped in to arrest Paul in an effort to keep the peace. With permission from the tribune, Paul addressed the angry Jewish mob, sharing his testimony about how Jesus changed his life.

From that context, we learned that Paul had been eager to share his story in Jerusalem ever since his own conversion.

Paul likely had high hopes that sharing his testimony would be successful. He thought that the Jews in Jerusalem who knew him as a zealous persecutor of Christians would be persuaded to believe in Jesus, because nothing short of God's transforming power could account for such a radical change in Paul.

He also probably believed that they would be in awe of the grace of God in forgiving him and using him in spite of all the horrible things he had done to oppose Jesus and his followers. Surely that would help them see that God's grace is available for them, too. Paul had every reason to believe that sharing his personal story would be effective.

So, Paul finally gets his chance to tell his story before the crowd in Jerusalem. We covered it last week. Paul tells his story in a respectful, innocuous way. There is no name-calling. No threats. No condescension. No self-righteousness. No hell fire and brimstone. Just a recounting of the facts of his encounter with Jesus and how it changed him.

And the crowd listened.

Until they didn't.

□ Acts 22:22 says,

ESV Acts 22:22 Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

The phrase □ “up to this word” seems to suggest that what Paul said just before they raised their voices may have been triggering. So, let’s back up and see what the trigger might have been. In □ verse 21, Paul says,

ESV Acts 22:21 “And he [the Lord] said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

By itself, the idea of reaching out to the Gentiles would probably not have been offensive. It was not unheard of for ancient Jews to reach out to Gentiles to try to convert them to Judaism (Mt. 23:15).

The more likely trigger was Paul’s insinuation that Gentiles were on equal footing with Jews and that Paul was sidestepping Judaism in leading Gentiles directly to God.<sup>2</sup> To be simultaneously respectful of Gentiles as equals and seemingly dismissive of Judaism as unnecessary was too much to bear.

This betrays an ethnic and religious prejudice in the crowd that not only provoked them, but also permeated the culture wars between ancient Jews and Gentiles. It was just more partisan acrimony.

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<sup>2</sup> Keener, Craig S., *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 15:1–23:35* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 3241; Gangel, Kenneth O., *Acts*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 374; Toussaint, Stanley D., “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. by J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 418.

Let's look again at □ verse 22 to review the extreme reaction. The angry mob shouted, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."

This seems like such a disproportionate reaction. But it shows that cancel culture is nothing new. In fact, one could argue that the current American cancel culture is an historically tame variety. In modern America, some merely want to silence our Christian witness. But in ancient Jerusalem, the mob wants to exterminate Paul for his Christian witness.

And things get worse. □ Verses 23 and 24 explain,

ESV Acts 22:23 And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air,

□ ESV Acts 22:24 the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this.

Paul escapes one beating, only to face another. Sharing his testimony brings abuse from both sides of the culture war, from Jews and Gentiles.

You may recall that Paul, who was perfectly capable of speaking Greek, addressed the Jewish audience in Hebrew or perhaps in the Hebrew dialect known as Aramaic. As such, the Roman authorities did not understand what he was saying. So, the decision is made to flog Paul as a means of getting him to confess in Greek what he had said in Hebrew to rile the crowd.

You may be wondering, why didn't the tribune just ask Paul what he said? Why flog him?

We are not told. But we can speculate. It was the tribune's job to keep the peace. Flogging may have served a couple of other purposes besides getting at the truth.

First, it would appease the crowd who demanded to see Paul punished.

Second, it would perhaps vent the frustrations of the tribune, who may have been thinking, "Paul, I saved you from these people, and I had them calmed down. Then I grant you a little latitude to address them and you stir them right back up again."

In that day, flogging was brutal and potentially deadly. It was what Jesus received just before he was crucified.<sup>3</sup> It involved a whip or flagrum, which came in different varieties. Some consisted of small iron chains with heavy metal balls at the ends. Others were leather straps interwoven with bone and small pieces of metal. Still others were wires strung with knucklebones and lead pellets.<sup>4</sup>

All these whips were available at an ancient retail warehouse known as Cruelco. Not really. Just some comic relief.

Paul was stretched out to receive the flogging with no ability to protect himself from the blows.

In that moment, having been rejected by the Jewish mob with whom he had been so eager to share, and now being stretched out to receive a brutal Roman flogging, how do you think Paul viewed the success of sharing his testimony?

Did he think, "Well, that went well"?

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<sup>3</sup> Gangel, 375.

<sup>4</sup> Keener, 3247-3248.

No doubt Paul was disappointed in the response of his fellow Jews. They did not react as he had hoped. It would be understandable if Paul felt as though he had somehow failed.

Paul's motives were pure. He wanted to introduce his fellow Jews to the free gift of eternal salvation that he himself had received.

Paul's approach was humble and respectful. He addressed them as a beggar sharing how he had found bread so that they could find it, too.

Paul obeyed his calling. God had appointed Paul to be a witness, just as God has appointed all believers to be witnesses. Sharing his story was an act of obedience.

So, □ why was this such a miserable failure?

We need to think deeply about this question because, as followers of Jesus, we are going to face it a lot, particularly in our culture. It is inevitable. Sooner or later, we are going to do something with good intentions and in a Christlike way in obedience to God. And it is going to fall flat. We are going to be disappointed. It is going to hurt. It may even blow back on us. And we are going to ask ourselves, why was this such a miserable failure?

And we are likely to entertain various answers, such as:

- Something must be wrong.
- Or I must have messed this up.
- Or I am a failure.
- Or God is not in this.
- Or this is not worth it.
- Or I am not cut out for this.

- Or God is not good.

And such thinking is understandable.

We live in a results-oriented culture. In sports, if you are a coach who does not win, you get fired. In business, if you do not make your numbers, you get canned. In education, grades are based on academic performance, not character traits.

I am not decrying this as a bad thing. It is just the way it is.

And so, it is easy to conclude that Paul's testimony was a failure because it did not produce the outcome we would have hoped.

But what if, in God's economy, our success is not measured by results? And what if we are asking the wrong question?

The question, why was this such a miserable failure? is making an important assumption. The assumption is that this is a miserable failure, because we tend to define success or failure based on desired outcomes.

But what if we are defining success in the wrong way?

What if we're making the wrong assumption?

In the Christian life, if we define success based on desired outcomes, we are setting ourselves up for despair and disillusionment because so many outcomes are beyond our control.

And sometimes, our desire to control outcomes can even be a form of foolish pride. I can sometimes arrogantly think I have more god-like power to effect change than I actually do. Such pride takes the credit



when desired outcomes are realized. And the same pride takes the blame when things go south. But often, neither the credit nor the blame are mine to take.

God is in control. I am not.

Here's the big idea I draw from this: □ Live faithfully for God; leave the results to him.

Success in the Christian life is not defined by results over which we have no control. Success is living faithfully for God regardless of the outcomes.

In our story, Paul is the example. In courageously sharing his testimony in adverse conditions, Paul was living faithfully for God. That alone is a laudable success quite apart from the results.

If we care deeply about the wellbeing of others, it would be normal and reasonable to be disappointed in the response Paul got. But we need to be careful to distinguish our part and God's part. Our part is to live faithfully for God. God's part is to oversee the results.

When we try to take on responsibility for God's job, it can be an act of foolish pride that sets us up for disillusionment.

Our focus should be on living faithfully for God, leaving the results to him.

This idea is corroborated elsewhere in Scripture. For example, □ Proverbs 21:31 says,

ESV Proverbs 21:31 The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.

When God calls us to battle, our part is to do all we can to prepare for it, including readying the horse.

But the victory belongs to the Lord. That is to say we should leave the results to him. All we can do is our best for him. That's our part. God's part is to manage the results, and so we leave the results to him. We are not responsible for the victory. God is.

Our big idea is also corroborated in ☐ John 15:5, where Jesus says to his followers,

ESV John 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

As branches, our job is to abide in the vine, which is to say, our job is to live faithfully for the Lord, staying connected to him. His job is to bring the results, which in this metaphor is the fruit. We cannot produce fruit on our own. So, we focus on abiding and leave the fruit bearing to him.

The prophet Jeremiah is yet another example. God directed Jeremiah preach to the people of Israel and told him in advance that his preaching would not yield favorable results. As recorded in ☐ Jeremiah 7:27, God said to Jeremiah,

ESV Jeremiah 7:27 "So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you."

That is an assignment no preacher wants. But Jeremiah was faithful to obey exactly what God said he should do. And the people of Israel did

exactly what God said they would do. They ignored all of Jeremiah's preaching.

Does that make Jeremiah a failure? Absolutely not. He exemplifies our big idea: □ Live faithfully for God, leave the results to him.

I can anticipate an objection that I myself might have lodged years ago. Isn't this just an excuse for Christian laziness? Isn't this a handy rationalization for half-baked ministry initiatives and half-hearted work in the church?

It could be. But it shouldn't be. Yes, this idea can be abused. But so can God's grace. That an idea can be abused doesn't make it untrue.

Leaving the results to God does not mean we don't care about the results. Because we care deeply about the wellbeing of people, we care deeply about outcomes. But we hold them loosely, recognizing that they are beyond our control.

Leaving the results to God does not give us license to let up one bit in our drive to serve God and others with the highest degree of effort and excellence. Living faithfully for God means we give our best always.

And leaving the results to God does not mean that we don't constantly evaluate what we're doing with an eye toward improving what we can. If results are disappointing, of course we prayerfully consider how we can do things better. We want to learn whatever we can from disappointing outcomes. But sometimes, tidy explanations elude us. Sometimes, the only thing to learn is to leave the results to God. And to be content with not being in control and not always getting the outcomes we want.

Back in Acts 2, the apostle Peter preached to a Jewish crowd in Jerusalem, and as a result, 3,000 came to faith in Christ.

Now, a couple of decades later in our text in Acts 22, Paul also shares his testimony about Jesus to a Jewish crowd in the very same city, resulting in zero converts and a flogging in the works.

Who was more pleasing to God in these situations, Peter or Paul? Who will receive the greater reward from God for their specific work, Peter or Paul?

The truth is, Peter was not responsible for converting 3,000 and Paul was not responsible for converting zero. Because the victory belongs to the Lord. The fruit is *his* responsibility. Both Peter and Paul lived faithfully for God.

If I were Paul, I would probably look back on Peter's success and wonder, why was my testimony such a miserable failure? And I would likely entertain various answers, such as:

- Something must be wrong.
- Or I must have messed this up.
- Or I am a failure.
- Or God is not in this.
- Or this is not worth it.
- Or I am not cut out for this.
- Or God is not good.

And Satan would be delighted for me to buy these lies. Satan would be happy to use my own foolish pride against me and take me out of commission.

I need to keep reminding myself: Live faithfully for God; leave the results to him.

In the remainder of our text, we are going to see that Paul discloses that he is a Roman citizen, which is pivotal. Roman citizenship carried special privileges. Roman law prohibited the flogging of Roman citizens without a formal hearing and a proper verdict of condemnation. Roman officers who violated this law were themselves subject to serious charges.<sup>5</sup>

With that in mind, let's see how the story unfolds, beginning in □ verse 25.

ESV Acts 22:25 But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?"

□ ESV Acts 22:26 When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen."

□ ESV Acts 22:27 So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes."

□ ESV Acts 22:28 The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth."

□ ESV Acts 22:29 So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

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<sup>5</sup> *The ESV Study Bible.*

□ ESV Acts 22:30 But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.

Paul is going to get an opportunity to speak directly and personally to the most powerful people in Jerusalem—an opportunity he would not have otherwise had if his earlier testimony had “better” results.

God is in control. We are not.

□ Live faithfully for God; leave the result to him.

It does not take a prophet to foresee that living faithfully for God in our modern American culture will be met with increasing opposition.

We can anticipate more pressure to shut up about Jesus.

We can expect increased intimidation to suppress any biblical view that is countercultural.

We can predict a greater pull to abandon God’s transcendent, scriptural truth in favor of truths we manufacture for ourselves.

In all this, living faithfully for God comes with a warning label: Results may vary. Outcomes may not always be what we had hoped. We may be disappointed. We may be shunned, or left heartbroken with seemingly little to show for our efforts.

But this is nothing new. Paul faced it, and encourages us in □ 2 Timothy 3:12,

ESV 2 Timothy 3:12 Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

Paul wrote this looking back on his own experiences, including the persecution in our text.

Jesus faced it, too, and confirms in □ John 15:18,

ESV John 15:18 “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.”

And a few verses later, in □ John 16:33, Jesus assures us, saying,

ESV John 16:33 “. . . In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Thankfully, our success before God is not determined by results; otherwise, we might be tempted to crawl in a hole and give up. Rather, our success is determined by our faithfulness.

Which brings us back to the big idea: □ Live faithfully for God; leave the results to him.

I probably need this sermon more than you do. Many of you know that I am a recovering perfectionist and workaholic whose greatest fear is failure. My propensity is to focus not on what is good, but instead on what is imperfect.

When the results of my work are not what I had hoped, my default is to think that I am a disappointment—not just that I see the results as disappointing, but to see myself as a disappointment. At the root of this default is a certain brokenness mixed with a foolish pride that wants to take responsibility for things that aren’t mine to take.

My challenge is to continually override that dysfunctional default, and to remind myself of the truth. Live faithfully for God; leave the results to him.

Let's pray. Lord, liberate us from the mistaken idea that our success is determined by outcomes. Help us to live faithfully for you, leaving the results in your hands. Amen.