

Riding the Roller Coaster of Faith

Matthew 21:9-15

Each year when it comes to Palm Sunday I try to look at the celebration from a little different angle. And so, this year rather than zooming in and looking at particular details of the story like the owner of the donkey, or the details of the journey from Bethany to Jerusalem, or the various responses of the people, I've taken a step back. Rather than looking more closely at the events I've tried to see the bigger picture. I've looked at the events leading up to this day as well as the events that follow.

What I've noticed is several things. Think about what it was like for the disciples. With every miracle Jesus performed there was a building sense of anticipation in the disciples. The cheering crowds as the disciples came into Jerusalem must have made the disciples feel that the moment they had been waiting for had arrived. Jesus would soon take his rightful place as the Messiah. The celebration of Passover on Thursday must have added to this special time. Passover was a family celebration and the disciples were considered to be "family" by Jesus.

But during the supper there were the troubling words about betrayal. There was the refreshing retreat to the garden. There was the confusing anguished prayer by the Lord. This was followed by the arrest of Jesus. There was the unbelievable mock trial and tortuous death. This would have been followed by grief, numbness and confusion. The resurrection took this group of devastated disciples and filled them with life and enthusiasm that they never had before. Then there was the sadness of his ascension.

This was followed by the empowerment of the coming of the Holy Spirit. There was the adrenalin burst of seeing thousands coming to faith. And then there was the devastating persecution of the church.

Do you see the same thing I did? One minute things were great, the next minute things were difficult. There were victories and there were defeats, joy and sorrow, times of feeling very close to God and times when they felt God was far away.

The best way to describe it is to liken their experience to a roller coaster. There are times when you seem to gradually be climbing the mountain of intimacy. Then suddenly you are plunged into confusion and you roll and rise and fall again.

I read the story of a pastor in Cleveland who lost his only son, an only child, in the war in Iraq. Before the loss, he had ministered to a lot of people in his church through the years. These people have lost a loved one because of the crimes and violence that pervaded the city. He offered them comfort and pointed them to God. Now, with the death of his son, he himself needed comfort. He was devastated, in fact, and asked, "Why, Lord? What is the purpose of this? Where are you?" You see, even Pastors can break down under the weight of life's problems.

That's the way your life is, isn't it? Days of victory seem to be quickly followed by days of difficulty. The highs inevitably seem to be followed by struggles. From this simple observation I want to give you three simple truths today. They aren't profound, but I hope you will find that they are helpful.

1. ROLLER COASTER FAITH IS NORMAL

Have you ever read a write-up of a movie and it says that the movie is good, that it's no. 1, that it's the best thriller, only to find out when you get there that it bored you to death?

The write-up that is often presented about Christianity is just as deceptive. 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 do know peace, joy and victory. But then there is a pothole in the roadway of faith. Other difficulties may 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.

But that's not generally the case. The roller coaster is part of the Christian life. Jesus says in John 10:10 (KJV), "*I am come that they might have life, and that*

they might have it more abundantly.” He’s saying, “My purpose in coming here is so that you’ll live life to the full. So you can enjoy it. So you can have a blast.” But in John 16:33 (MSG) he also says, *“In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties.”* Is he contradicting himself? No, he’s just being realistic. If Jesus is in us, life takes on a different meaning. We’re changed. We’re transformed. We can now forsake all the sinful things we used to do, things that give us and others a headache. But the world around us and many people around us don’t change. That’s why we’ll continue to experience problems in life.

Please don't get deceived by some preachers out there who teach that as a Christian, you should experience health, wealth, and prosperity. Prosperity Movement, does it ring a bell? How about Name it and Claim it? Folks, I know plenty of people whose faith have been shattered because of this teaching. At first, they feel good because things are going well. They have money, they have good health. Then, the inevitable happens. A grave disease strikes. And someone from the Health and Wealth movement comes and says, “You are sick because you don't have enough faith. You are sick because there is sin in your life.” Sounds like the “caring” friends of Job who tells him the same thing. Folks, you are living in fantasy if you think you won't get sick or become poor in this world. But I think the economic problems we are facing in this country are making some wake up to reality.

Now, it is easy to trust God when everything is going well. But it is also easy to become lazy and superficial. But you know what, the dips of life and hard experiences help us to develop roots. Plants need some dry times to force the roots down into the ground to look for water. And dry and difficult times come to our lives in order to help us grow strong as well. In fact, the Bible says that we should be glad that things like this come our way. James 1:2-4 (NLT) says, *“Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.”*

When it comes to marriage, for example, there will always be tough times. No marriage is perfect. There will be moments when you wonder how life would have been different if you had married someone else. But every married person must realize that when these thoughts come to their mind they are not failures.

They have not made some terrible mistake. They are going through the normal process of growing in relationship. 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. We must understand it for ourselves, and also for our fellow brothers and sisters. When you are in a good area of your life and they are not it doesn't mean that they need to be "more like you". When they seem to be faltering in their faith, don't judge them. It just means that you are on different spots in your journey.

So, roller coaster faith is normal. Then,

2. ROLLER COASTER FAITH MUST DEPEND ON GOD'S PROMISES NOT ON MY FEELINGS

Once we understand the roller coaster effect we must 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 promises contained in his Word.

We can trust his promises. 1 Kings 8:56 (NLT) says, *"Praise the LORD who has given rest to his people Israel, just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the wonderful promises he gave through his servant Moses."*

In Joshua 21:45 (NIV), it also says, *"Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled."*

If God was faithful to his people Israel, he will be faithful too to his people now. The Bible says that God never changes. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is not like man that he should change.

Our emotions might suggest that God has deserted us but God has told us that He will never leave us or forsake us. 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 will give us strength." We may feel that we are strong and invincible, but the Bible warns us to "pay attention lest we fall."

We may feel that we are not "good enough" but the Bible tells us that we are "saved by grace and not by works". Our feelings are blown and tossed by the seas of circumstance. God's Word is an anchor that holds solid.

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 your needs.

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.

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."

You may find yourself fascinated by some of the "new spirituality", but God says not to dabble in the occult or in mysticism because it draws you to the Devil and away from Him.

You may feel completely deserted and alone, but God says, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

You may feel that you have "every right to be happy" even if it means ignoring God's truth. But God tells you that your true happiness cannot be found apart from Him.

Having said all this, there is 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. And Satan will do anything to keep us from God's Word.

He'll try to get us to resist making time for God's Word like we do other obligations like taking out the garbage. He'll try to convince us that we aren't smart enough to understand the Bible. He'll try to get us to believe that there will always be time "later" to read. He'll suggest that we substitute other reading for the Bible. And he'll whisper that we already know what the Bible says.

We must battle the Devil's attempts 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.

And here are some very practical suggestions:

1. Find yourself a modern translation of the Bible so you can understand it.
2. Read systematically. Read through an entire book of the Bible at a time. Start with Jesus. Start in the gospels and get to know the Savior.
3. Strive to memorize one verse a week and then review often. If you have a smartphone, you can download an app called "Bible Verses" and it will give you a systematic way to memorize verses.
4. Keep a journal. Write down what you learn. Look for the principle in the passage. Most stories and instruction are designed to teach us something. Learn to ask, "what is it that God wants me to learn". Move beyond information to application. Learn from the insights of others . . . but don't substitute those insights for personal study
5. Share what you learn with others.

The third thing we need to know about roller coaster faith is that

3. THE ROLLER COASTER CAN BE FUN IF YOU TRUST GOD

I am not a roller coaster fanatic. I prefer the steady and stable to the wild and crazy. But I do ride a roller coaster now and then. The last time was two years ago.

There are times when you look at those huge rides and you think that anyone would be crazy to get on one of those things. You are high off the ground. There are steep drops that make you feel like you will fall out of your seat and there are turns that cause you to dangle upside down. Why would you risk such things?

There are a couple of reasons people do this. First, some people are just nuts! But 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 is, you will be safe because the manufacturer built the ride with safety as a first priority.

Second, you trust the restraints that are 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 can be enjoyable. We can trust the Lord. He wants to bless you and not curse you. 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. When we trust the Lord, here are some benefits:

1. Joy – “But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy.” (Psalm 5:11 NIV)

2. Deliverance – “In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.

They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.” (Psalm 22:4-5 NIV)

3. Vindication – “No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame” (Psalm 25:2-3)

4. Mercy – “Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.” (Psalm 32:10)

5. Provision – “Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.” (Psalm 37:3-5)

6. Guidance – “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5,6)

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 enjoy the journey.

God has promised that He would get us home. He has given us His Word as a restraint to protect us. He has given us His Holy Spirit to preserve us. He has

given us the fellowship of believers to encourage us. God has given us many teachers to guide us. We are well restrained but we must take advantage of those restraints. But all the restraints on a ride are useless if they are not fastened.

If we remember who created life, and we trust the tools He has given us, then we can enjoy the ride. 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.

We will enjoy the journey rather than simply endure it. We will live life the way it was meant to be lived.

So, where are you in the course 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. 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.

And maybe this is 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 give you some wisdom that is related by Max Lucado.

He was living on a houseboat in Miami when Hurricane David was heading toward him. 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. Those trees are gonna get eaten by the 'cane. Your only hope is to anchor deep," he said. "Place four anchors in four different locations, leave the rope slack, and pray for the best."

Folks, anchor deep. Tie your hopes and confidence not to the surface things like emotions, circumstances and the approval and gimmicks of men.

Drop your anchor and tie your hope 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.

I suspect the disciples were on 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. And throw your hands up in the air and enjoy the ride.