



March 15, 2015
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Disciple-making 101: A 90 Day Challenge
Awful Things
Luke 20-John 2

We are drawing near the end of our 90 Day Challenge to read one gospel chapter every day. Many have asked what is next. Well, beginning the Sunday after Easter, we are going to do 90 Day Challenge II: the Acts of the Holy Spirit—the Book of Acts. I hope you will join in with the same gusto.

Last Sunday I shared something that happened to me that morning. I got up early, went into the kitchen, opened the fridge, squatted down to get an egg and the refrigerator door fell off on top of me. I have recreated the moment for your viewing pleasure! *[picture]* I am also proud to say that I ordered the hinge and, in a very manly fashion, repaired the door without having to call any stinking repairman. But I must say, it was surreal, lying there on the floor at 5:30 on a Sunday the morning, surrounded by ketchup bottles and pickle jars. I remember thinking: “What in the world just happened to me?”

You laugh because you love it when your pastor makes a fool of himself. But seriously, there is not a person in this room who, sometime in their life, hasn't had a similar experience. Without warning, life seems to fall in on you, and you find yourself saying, “What in the world just happened to me?” But it's not ketchup bottles and pickle jars lying around you... it is the pieces of your marriage, the remnants of your health, the shards of your reputation, the fragments of your finances that lie in shambles.

Over the last months, we have been studying how Jesus made disciples; through parables and miracles and relationship and great questions, Jesus made disciples. But in this week's readings, we learn that Jesus also makes disciples in the awful things of life. When life suddenly falls in on you; when you find yourself lying on your back asking, “What in the world just happened to me?”

But that's not the way we want to grow as disciples, is it? We prefer parables and miracles and healings and resurrections—the good things, the marvelous things. That's the fun way to become a disciple. But the simple truth is, however good and marvelous life can be, there will be awful times, right? Even for followers of Jesus.

I sat for lunch with a man this week who once held his daughter who had just been hit by a truck... and he knew she was gone. Awful. The session prayed Thursday night with a young husband, a father of a one-year-old who just found out that the

throat cancer he thought was in remission has metastasized. Awful. This week I emailed a man in prison; if he doesn't pay protection money every week, he gets beaten up. Awful. Christians in the Muslim world are fighting for their lives against the stark evil that is ISIS. Christians are being kidnapped and murdered in Syria, Nigeria, Libya... awful, awful, awful.

How many here this morning—who love Jesus and are seeking to serve him—have nevertheless gone through something awful in their life? How many are, right now, going through something awful? Life is sometimes hard. Life is sometimes awful. And being a Christian is no guarantee that you will not experience awful times.

Not according to some preachers, though. Huge churches have been built around the promise that, as a Christian, you are guaranteed prosperity, health and protection. And of course such churches grow, especially in America. Who doesn't want to be told that if they belong to Jesus, they will have a bigger home, newer car, healthier body, perfect marriage, model children and no problems... no awful times?

But sooner or later, every one of those persons will find a refrigerator door on top of them, and then, what will be the condition of their faith? If these things "promised to them by God" are suddenly taken away, what does that say about their God if not that he is a liar or an incompetent or a rascal, toying with us for his own delight?

But the biggest problem with such false teaching is this: it goes directly against what Jesus taught and what he experienced. You cannot read last week's chapters and misunderstand that. In fact, you begin to realize that the awful times of life are a hard but deep way that Jesus makes genuine disciples... not posers, but real followers.

In Luke 20, we saw the religious leaders looking for a way to trap Jesus, hoping to catch him in anything he said or did so that they could destroy him. Awful. In chapter 21 Jesus prophesies about the end times. He warns about false prophets and earthquakes and famines and pestilence. He warns that his followers will be persecuted... that they will even be betrayed by parents and brothers and relatives and friends. Awful!

Then we watch as Jesus himself is betrayed. Judas sells him out for money! But even Peter denied Jesus...Peter the rock! And the rest of his disciples? They disappeared like rats from a sinking ship. We saw Jesus was arrested, mocked, blindfolded, insulted and beaten. Awful stuff! And even the first chapter of John's gospel hints at Jesus' rejection and betrayal when it says in verse 10, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

But of all that we read, the most awful is chapter 23, for here we read the story of the awful death of Jesus. I'd like to tell you a story from God's Word. No slides below; I want to tell it.

²⁶As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus... ³²Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." ³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." ³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews.

³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

⁴⁴It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man."

This is the most awful chapter in Luke's gospel. Here we watch with horror—the most perfect man who ever lived, the man who taught as no one had ever taught, healed people with a touch or a word, silenced storms with a rebuke, multiplied food for the hungry, cast out evil spirits from pitiful souls, touched dead bodies and brought them back to life—how the world receives such perfect goodness. Does it throw a party? Does it place a crown upon his head and proclaim him king and Lord of all? Does it bow before him as creator?

No. How did this world receive the Son of God? It killed him. It laid open his brow with a crown of spiky thorns, it laid open his back with a whip tipped with lead and glass, it laid him on a beam soaked with the blood of its previous victims, drove spikes between his wrist bones and into his heel bones, and then raised him up into

the sky as a mockery and as a warning. He was hung in such a way that slowly, sadistically, he suffocated to death.

The perfect, sinless Son of God who never did anything bad and always did everything good died. It was awful. I know death will not have the last word, I know his death brought us life, I know Easter is coming, but for now... we simply pause before the horror of that moment. If the teachings of Jesus are to be believed, if the example of Jesus' own life is any indication, every disciple will face awful times. The question, is this: How do we allow the awful times to build us instead of break us? How can even the awful things make us better disciples of Jesus?

Well, Jesus gives us three truths—three last, gasping lessons uttered from the cross. Only Luke captures these words from Jesus, spoken in the midst of the most awful moment of his life. Perhaps the Savior can speak words of encouragement to us in our awful things.

First we hear the unlikely cry from Jesus as the soldiers drive the spikes home and lurch him into the air: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." The cynics are inclined to say, "Are you kidding? They knew exactly what they were doing. They were killing the greatest risk ever to their religious power." They were killing the only Son of God. They deserved the vengeance of the Heavenly Father. They deserved to be struck down, but that's not what Jesus begs... He begs forgiveness. He pleads their ignorance. He offers benefit of the doubt for the horrible things they are doing to him.

Jesus' first word in the face of awful things is Grace. One supremely awful thing about awful things is that they can embitter us. When we have been betrayed, abandoned, abused, mistreated, slandered, impoverished... we want to lash out. We want retribution. We want vengeance. One of my awful things was a seven-year legal battle through accusations I considered unfounded and unfair. It drove me into depression. And there were times when I wanted vengeance; wanted my accuser to be crushed so that I might be vindicated. But I could tell that those longings for justice were only eating away at my soul and, in the end, I begged the Lord to give me the same grace Jesus offered on the cross; the grace that offered forgiveness and sought reconciliation. And I realized it wasn't for my enemy's sake; it was for my sake. Anything less than the grace of Jesus only embitters, possesses and destroys me.

Whatever awful thing you are experiencing—however you have been hurt or wronged or defamed—the message from Jesus' parched lips to your soul is, "Grace! Grace! Grace! Let go of your longing for vengeance and retribution. Trust God to defend your honor and mete out justice, but you choose grace."

The next word Jesus spoke to the criminal beside him. Remember his plea? "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied, "I tell you the

truth, today you will be with me in Paradise." Again, onlookers would have scoffed... paradise... today? First, they probably wouldn't die that fast! They weren't supposed to. Crucifixion was designed to drag out an excruciating death over several days. Often birds of prey would pluck out their eyes as they hung helplessly before death had taken them. And the only thing that awaited them, after they mercifully had died, was to be thrown on the smoldering garbage dump in a valley called Gehenna. Not exactly Paradise.

But the incredible promise of Jesus was that this rotten, no-good criminal who had in his last moments of life turned to Jesus with a plea for forgiveness would join him in Paradise. Such is the power of the mercy of Christ, that he can save even the scum of the earth at the last hour.

The first word was Grace, the second word is Hope. No matter how awful these present circumstances, the follower of Jesus always has hope that things will get better. In fact, it is a guarantee. Remember, this is the Jesus who can do miracles of healing and restoration and resurrection. No one can offer greater hope in the face of hopeless, awful things than Jesus. But even if He chooses not to answer our prayer for deliverance in this life, there awaits for all who love him a Paradise that will make the best this world has to offer look like a slum. I remember sitting with a dying man on the Saturday before Easter and saying to him, "Bud, you are going to celebrate Easter before the rest of us, because today, you will be with Jesus in Paradise." To the person who suffers in an awful season of life, the sure promise of Jesus is this: it will get better. Whatever you are facing, it will get better. Hope!

The final word of Jesus in the face of awful things was the final word of Jesus on the cross. "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit." He was suffering on the cross, but he knew that his death would bring even greater suffering because he was about to take upon himself the sin of the whole world. Every foul thing ever thought, said or done would be laid upon him like a scapegoat. He would descend into Hell and deposit there the sin of the world. During that three day period, Jesus would experience something he had never experienced in eternity past: separation from his Heavenly Father. A holy God could not look upon a sin-soaked sacrifice.

So it wasn't just a brutal death that made Jesus suffer; it was the prospect of broken relationship with his Father that caused him agony. And yet, his final words were those of surrender. "Into your hands I commit my Spirit. I trust my life to you." And those are his words to us in the midst of awful things: Trust. Trust God even though you can't see a way out, even though you are in pain or frightened or angry—perhaps even angry with God—trust God anyway. He is trustworthy. He loves you. He has his hand on you. And in the end, no matter what life dishes out, if you trust your life to God, as Jesus put it "not a hair on your head will perish!"

Sometimes life is awful even for Christians. In fact, sometimes because we are genuine Christians, life gets awful. If someone promises otherwise, they are a false prophet. But the words of Jesus to us in the awful times are these: grace, hope and

trust. Defy betrayal with grace. Defy despair with Hope. Defy doubt with Trust. And watch as the triumphant one redeems your awful things.