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Series: You Are Sent, Vol 3

Sermon: These Weak Chains

Text: Acts 22, et al.

Speaker: Spence Shelton

COLLEGE STUDENTS – WELCOME BACK!!! We love you and we are a better church with you here.

NE – Meet team in lobby

MPR – Connect with Pastor Scott after service

Years ago, I had the chance to travel to Afghanistan. It was in the late 2000s and there was a peacetime window that opened up. We were investigating church planting opportunities. It was a really wild experience. We were driving and walking through the aftermath of war. You'd see small Toyota pickups with a swivel chair installed in the bed. used to be makeshift gun turrets in street warfare. But now they just swiveled empty in the beds of trucks carrying farm supplies. I saw a soviet tank broken down on the side of the road with the cannon barrel being used to dry clothes on. It was wild. And we ended up figuring out a spot to get started and for the next decade plus the team of people we sent saw the gospel move there. And I thought about those churches and believers this week who already had it hard because family would disown them when they decided to become Christians. Now, because of the Taliban taking over, they most likely will be imprisoned and or killed for professing their faith. And I thought about our message we are in today. Our last message in Acts. Where Paul is in prison for preaching the gospel that he once persecuted.

And I realized how much more sense this book must make to our afghan brothers and sisters than to us. Time and time again the book of Acts demonstrates that if you preach this gospel... the people you grew up with are going to put you in jail and try to kill you.

And yet these Christians do it anyway. Because there is something transcendent about Jesus. Something about Jesus that lifts the eyes of your heart to a place where you see eternity and live with a power-giving hope here and now. And prison chains just can't compete with that. We can endure the chains. endure the stones. endure the blade. To live is Christ, to die is gain. Today, in our last sermon in the You Are Sent series, I hope to call us to **live for Christ**. That's really it. By that I mean that each one of us elevates Christ to the top priority in our life. And not in a cultural Christian "tip your hat to Jesus first" kind of way. I'm talking to live for Christ means I will approach my day asking, "What would Christ have me do with this day?" To live for Christ...I want that to move from cliché Christian motto to a decision-making grid. To a courage giving force in your life.

I want to show you today WHY and HOW Paul tries to live for Christ. And I want to invite you into a life not lived for yourself. But for Christ. We'll start with Paul's testimony in Acts 22. And then I'll show you some of what he encounters after that. Passage: Acts 22.1-22

"Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense before you."

2 When they heard that he was addressing them in Aramaic, they became even quieter. 3 He continued, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strictness of our ancestral law. I was zealous for God, just as all of you are today. 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, arresting and putting both men and women in jail, 5 as both the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me. After I received letters from them to the brothers, I traveled to Damascus to arrest those who were there and bring them to Jerusalem to be punished.

Ok this story was first shown to us in Acts 9 which we covered like a year ago. And now Paul has had some space and time to process it. He's begun to understand a little of what God was up to in saving him. See what he's doing here is saying...I AM ONE OF YOU. In fact, in Galatians 1 Paul says

13 For you have heard about my former way of life in Judaism: I intensely persecuted God's church and tried to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many contemporaries among my people, because I was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. -- Galatians 1:13-14

Paul is connecting with his people. "I'm not some outsider. I'm one of you." And he *IS* one of them. Ethnically. He's Jewish and here he is in front of an angry group of Jews. He's one of them and yet not one of them. He USED to find his identity in his ethnicity. But now while he still retains his ethnicity, he's found his identity in something better. He's found Jesus. And the traditions of his ancestors can't compete with the grace of Jesus. They are weak WHEN compared to Jesus.

Paul is saying That way of life...it is his *former* way of life. And THAT is the reality for anyone who has found Jesus. They have a former life that used to be their everything.

Living for Christ means humbly recognizing the past Christ saved you from

Paul says there was a time where he was exactly like them. Where he would have been leading this mob. After all he was the one who sat there overseeing the stoning of Stephen. And now he's grieved by that. He's not gloating about his past. The way some Christians talk about their past sin...it's like they salivate over it and wish they could go back to it. And yes, sin is temporarily pleasurable. But Christian if you think of your sin and revel in the memory, I implore you to Hebrews 12. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Let him lift your eyes back onto him. Because he really is better. Anyway, Paul is acknowledging his former life as a persecutor of Christians.

He's saying I was that way. But something happened to me. See what you gotta understand is NOBODY is a Christian because they are born to Christian parents. Nobody is a Christian because they grew up going to church. Nobody is a Christian because of their morality. No. EVERY Christian was once NOT a Christian. We have a past. Where we were living for ourselves. This is why the gospel says ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Every Christian is just as sinful as their non-Christian neighbor, classmate, and friend. Some of ya'll are here today because a Christian friend invited you to come to church. you probably

have a ton in common with that friend. You've got hopes, fears, habits, dreams for a future, favorite pizza...favorite Taylor swift song. You've got a lot in common. I need you to know Christians are still humans.

But there is a deep divide too. They are like you and yet completely different. And it's because Jesus interrupted that life and SHOWED them they had been living a life apart from God. And their fears and dreams and hopes for purpose and significance...God just burst on the scene and showed them the answer to it all! Their secret sins that nobody else knew about...God showed them a way of salvation. Their public sins that EVERYBODY knew about...God showed them a way of salvation.

EVERY CHRISTIAN has a past. And what God often does is he takes somebody out of a group of friends...out of a community...saves them...and then drops them back into the group. And says ok now tell them what I've done for you. And that's how awakenings start. I was just like you...then God saved me from myself. And he can do the same for you. EVERY Christian has a past.

This is where some of you could have your greatest ministry. Some of you think that because you sinned with that friend group you can no longer be friends with that group. And you alienate the very people that God is sending you to.

God saved some of you out of eating disorders in high school and now you've got the chance to go back and say "I've been there! Just like you! And I found something better." Former athletes can go back and say "I've BEEN THERE. Was just like you. I love the game. But then God interrupted. And I'm telling

you HE'S BETTER!" The Corporate Ladder – I've been there. God interrupted. The closet addict. I've been there. God interrupted. Living for the weekend. I've been there. Living for your Spouse. I've been there. Living for your kids. I've been there. I've been there.

You know, next year we are sending our outgoing student director Alan Waruhiu, back home to Kenya to plant a church. You know why? This right here. They are his people. But something has changed in Alan. He's the same, but different. And he's got a message of hope from God for his people that starts with "I've been there. I know you." YOU HAVE THAT MESSAGE! And I believe God has people to save through you sharing the story of his grace on you.

Let's keep going. 6-16. Paul is going to say what happened to him next:

6 "As I was traveling and approaching Damascus, about noon an intense light from heaven suddenly flashed around me. 7 I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

8 "I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?'

"He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.' 9 Now those who were with me saw the light, but they did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

10 "I said, 'What should I do, Lord?'

“The Lord told me, ‘Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told everything that you have been assigned to do.’

11 “Since I couldn’t see because of the brightness of the light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and went into Damascus. 12 Someone named Ananias, a devout man according to the law, who had a good reputation with all the Jews living there, 13 came and stood by me and said, ‘Brother Saul, regain your sight.’ And in that very hour I looked up and saw him. 14 And he said, ‘The God of our ancestors has appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One, and to hear the words from his mouth, 15 since you will be a witness for him to all people of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now, why are you delaying? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

OK if you are reading at this point you are thinking...Well YEAH that must be nice. I would become a Christian too if Jesus came down...stopped me dead in my tracks and told me what to do. Ok I get that. And I’ve definitely felt that before. Let me offer you a couple of things to consider.

- FIRST – even though Jesus did appear to him...he didn’t explain anything. He didn’t call him to repentance or anything. Instead, **he SENT him to a fellow Jew who believed the gospel.** Ananias. And then Ananias explained the gospel to him. So even in this extreme encounter, God still operates according to his plan which is that PEOPLE share the gospel with people. Even Jesus chose not to share his own good news to Paul but to send him to a person to share the good

news. SO, if you are waiting for Jesus to appear to you... he’s just going to send you to a Christian ANYWAY. So why not just listen to the gospel message from the Christian he’s already sent to you!?

- **Secondly...2 Peter 1.19.** Peter actually says that while he heard God’s voice on the mountain with James and John...he found the **scriptures to be a surer word from the Lord.** So, if you have Christians & God’s word and they are telling you the same thing – you’ve got the surest word from God you could have.

And that word says that GOD LOVES YOU! HE LOVES YOU! HE created you. That’s why you think about eternal things. Cause he created you in his image. It’s why you ask questions of purpose. Its why you experience awe & wonder at things. You were made by an eternal God, and he imprinted his character onto you. And he says I love you & want to share that love with you. But the word says your sin...which is everything you’ve done or thought that wasn’t submitted to God...your sin has separated you from God. And the apostle Paul wrote in Romans that the wage of that sin is death. BUT THE GIFT of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Jesus died your death. So, you get life. Eternal life. So, Ananias told Paul. Turn from your sin. Receive by faith the forgiveness of Jesus. And be baptized. So, he did.

To live for Christ: respond to the gospel with repentance, faith, & baptism

Listen – talking to you who have never believed. I want to encourage you to respond to the gospel like Paul did. Receive

forgiveness by turning from your sin and believing Jesus died to save you from the penalty of your sin. Repent and believe. That's it! And then the public response...in every account in scripture...the public response of one who has believed the gospel, is to be baptized.

- Acts 2 - When Peter preaches the gospel at Pentecost...some listening ask what must I do to be saved? He says repent and then...be baptized.
- Acts 8 – Ethiopian official believes and then is baptized right there on the side of the road
- Mark 1 – it was the example Jesus gave. He was baptized by immersion
- Colossians 2 & Romans 6 teach that baptism is symbolic burial. That means you are put under the water symbolically identifying with Christ being put in the grave. Then just as Christ came out of the grave you are brought out of the water
- Acts 16 – Lydia is baptized after she believes, same thing happens in Matthew 3, John 4 Acts 2, Acts 8, Acts 10, Acts 18 (Crispus).

So, I want to encourage you to follow Christ's model, follow the instruction of his word, and be baptized! Some of you need to be baptized. We are going to celebrate baptism in 2 weekends. Please come this weekend and tell us if you want to follow Christ in baptism! Tell me. Right after service I'll be down here.

17 "After I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw him telling me, 'Hurry

and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'

19 "But I said, 'Lord, they know that in synagogue after synagogue I had those who believed in you imprisoned and beaten. 20 And when the blood of your witness Stephen was being shed, I stood there giving approval and guarding the clothes of those who killed him.'

21 "He said to me, 'Go, because I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

Ok so here's what makes Paul's story so helpful to all of us. He had experience going to his own people. That's what we are seeing today. He's in chains under accusation by his own people. But the Lord had also put a calling on his life to go to the gentiles. Non-Jews. People that the Jews didn't think were worthy of anything. The defiled dirty scourge of the earth. And God had told Paul – I MADE THEM, I LOVE THEM, I WANT THEM. Go preach my good news to them!

And brothers and sisters I promise you God's heart for the nations of the world has not changed. He made us, he loves us, and he wants us. And I say US because I belong to a gentile ethnic group. My ancestors are Scots Irish. We are thousands of miles from being Jewish. I love studying about the gospel traveling to Scotland because it's the story of God's pursuit of my people. And eventually his pursuit of me. Well, just like God sent Paul to the gentiles across the Mediterranean, just like he sent St. Patrick to my ancestors in Ireland, like he sent many here to the Americas...so he is still sending his people to

the far corners of the earth to announce the good news of the gospel. And I believe he has a part for all of us to play in that.

Living for Christ means looking for your part in God's global mission

I don't know what role you will play. But I know people are God's plan A for sending the gospel to the world. I know right now we have a partner in a certain region of south Asia that listen...is so densely populated that if you were to take their little region and make it its own country it would be the 5th most populated country on earth. There are 40 Christians working to reach that region. They've seen HUNDREDS reached in the past year. The harvest is plentiful...but the workers are few. And I believe the Lord is preparing some of you to go join that work. Because that's what God does. When we get swept up in God's love for us...we start to see other things through that perspective. We want others to know about it. And we aren't as stuck to our plans for ourselves as we once were. **The American dream just isn't that dreamy.** It's a weak set of chains trying to tie me & my family to a bunch of stuff.

Not when I've got a vision of heaven with people from every tribe tongue and nation. Give me THAT dream. Let me be a part of building an eternal kingdom.

I don't need treasure that's going to get rusty. I think about how fortunate I am to live in a house. Got a little yard. And I have to do SO MUCH maintenance. I gotta make sure the A/C unit has maintenance, the yard needs maintaining. Gotta get a bug guy, a plumber, an electrician, a roofer...because the

house need maintenance. WHAT A **WEAK** TREASURE my STUFF is. It is so weak it needs UPKEEP. That's not treasure. I'm not saying stuff is bad. I'm not. The lord blesses us with it, and I believe you should enjoy it. But I'm saying am I really going to make STUFF my heart's desire? If your treasure REQUIRES maintenance...it's lying to you.

* It's telling you I will make you happy & fulfilled as a person. And instead, it makes you anxious & tired.

- Leisure is a terrible treasure. It's great to rest. God commands it. But he says that rest is to be found IN HIM. Working hard just to lay around...it will corrode you from the inside out.
- Stuff is a terrible treasure.
- A family is a terrible treasure. Go ahead, put all your hopes & dreams on your kids. WATCH what that pressure does to them. They are a gift & worthy of all the sweat & toil you put into them. But they cannot be your source of happiness!

Don't waste your heart on weak treasure!

NO. I want something better. Something that will never fade. THAT is what God offers. Jesus says in Matthew 6 don't store up treasure here. Store up TREASURE in heaven. Where no thief can steal, and no rust can destroy. And THAT treasure...I can have it for free...and I can give it to the whole world. I want to be a part of God's mission to get that treasure to as many people as I can. Because that treasure is better. Christ is better. Don't waste your life on rusting, fading, moth attracting STUFF. Instead, look for what God is doing!

Listen here is something fascinating as you read the rest of Paul's journey. See the rest of Acts is just following Paul's journey as a prisoner who is trying to get to Rome to appear before Caesar. Which Paul sees as a way to go preach the gospel to Rome. Paul sees these weak chains as a free ticket to go preach the gospel where it isn't known. Or so he thinks. But what is almost comical is that after a long journey that I'll tell you more about in a second...Paul finally starts to get close to Rome and guess what it says?

After one day a south wind sprang up, and the second day we came to Puteoli. 14 There we found brothers and sisters and were invited to stay a week with them. And so we came to Rome. 15 Now the brothers and sisters from there had heard the news about us and had come to meet us as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. -- Acts 28:13-15

Paul thought he was going to preach Christ where he wasn't known. And he is greeted by a bunch of CHRISTIANS!! Ya'll listen to me. This happened all the time and here's why. As these everyday people with jobs & families and lives started becoming Christians...they preached the gospel as they went. They didn't need to quit their jobs and become missionaries. They recognized that GOD had already made them missionaries and their jobs were the vehicle by which they could take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

FIRST STEP – Mercy Missions Pipeline Card

- Come to the Mission of God class

I believe the gospel is going to go further faster when we ALL ask the question what is my part in God's mission. I know so many people who have gone to their multinational corporation they work for and said, "do we have an office in _____ and can I transfer there?" Most companies are so shocked you'd want to go they will pay you more to do it. So let me say it this way:

Do what you do to the glory of God, and do it somewhere strategic to the mission of God

This is why you need that mission of God class. Because maybe you always thought you'd have to quit your job to be a part of God's global mission. That's crazy! Don't quit your job, go with your job! At least hear what it might look like.

22 They listened to him up to this point. Then they raised their voices, shouting, "Wipe this man off the face of the earth! He should not be allowed to live!" -- Acts 22:1-22 (CSB)

Here we go again. His own people want to kill him. Why? Well in this particular case it's because he just told them God values the gentiles just as much as he does the Jews. And it's not just that these Jews didn't like that. It's that they considered it blasphemy punishable by death. This is a part of Paul's story for the rest of his life till he died. And he considered Jesus WORTH suffering for. And this threat...and all the other things he faced...they just didn't create doubt in Paul. Paul was that confident in God's plan.

To live for Christ is to trust God's faithfulness in all things

Chapters 23-28 are a summary of several TOUGH situations Paul gets into. He faces prison chains, mob violence, death plots, he's forgotten in prison for 2 years. He's shipwrecked. He's interrogated numerous times. He's set free by the emperor in Rome only to be imprisoned again and most believe he was beheaded in prison.

Now here's what gets me. The Whole time he is preaching Jesus & encouraging churches. In Prison? WRITE SOME LETTERS & Evangelize the prison. Shipwrecked? Tell fellow passengers about Jesus. On trial before Governors & emperors? AWESOME – A Chance to tell them about Jesus!

You never hear bitterness in Paul. WHY? Because the prison chains are WEAK defenses against the power of God.

All this suffering...it didn't stop Paul...it spurred him.

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. -- Romans 8:18

Paul chose to live for Christ. And those weak chains weren't even worthy to be compared to eternity with Christ. In fact, Paul counted it an honor to suffer for the gospel. It meant suffering like Christ did.

I want to read you the prayer one of those afghan pastors sent to a friend of mine the other day.

"I pray to God for those who need to be present. Those who are currently in war, hardship, suffering, destruction, pain,

disease. I pray that you show yourself to them and shine the light of faith in their hearts. Because there is no light to the beauty and glory of your light, your light is eternity, the mercy of all pains and the hope of all disappointments.

May God grant grace to our prayers and fill us with the Holy Spirit, remove darkness and gloom from us, and grant us eternal light. God help my reaction to fear. Have faith in you and obedience to your word. Help me to always remember that everything is in your control so I can find peace in you Amin"

I hope you hear in that...Christ is better. There is no light to the beauty and glory of your light. Your light is eternity. Wake up tomorrow and ask: What would Christ have me do today?

1. Recognize your past and thank God for saving you
2. If you haven't: repent of sin & receive salvation
3. Look for your part in God's global mission
4. Trust the faithfulness of God and obey him.