



## **A Painful Path – Part 4**

### **Seizing God's Opportunities**

**Pastor Mike Fabarez**

Well, this is the last week with our bulletin having that very dreary scene of the dark path as we started the series four weeks back about the pathway that gets painful. And we've all experienced that. And when we do, we usually do whatever we can to quickly reach for something that's going to help us, help us feel better, fix our problem. If that doesn't work right away we just start complaining. Matter of fact, when there's pain, people complain. That's just how it works. It's the normal reaction. It's the way everyone seems to do it. And I get it. I get it.

And complaining, by the way, just so you understand the word, it doesn't just mean that we're telling people that we're going through a hard time. It's not just describing the fact that there are difficult things in my life right now. Complaining is really expressing our annoyance and our dissatisfaction, our frustration, our disappointment that all these things are happening to us. That's what complaining is all about.

Well, it may be normal, it may be natural, it may be what people do but it certainly is not mature and it's not godly. And frankly, it's not helpful either. I know that people do it, but there's a better way, a better way to respond. And we've talked about several aspects of walking through the valley of the shadow of death and whatever that might be in small ways or big ways when the shepherd leads us down a pathway that gets hard. We've looked at various kinds of pain in this series that the Apostle Paul demonstrates in his own life and the things he was going through. We've looked at some things that we can try to mollify, as we said, or mitigate or try and repair. But then there are things we looked at last week we can't if we're going to be Christians we just cannot fix them.

But today we're going to look at just the last four verses of Acts 21, and we're going to see Paul set himself up to do something in Acts 22, which is deliver an amazing testimonial speech about his life with great concern for the people who he's speaking to. But the context is so important and while this kind of leaves us on a cliffhanger here at the end of Chapter 21, I want to just deal with these four verses where he sets up and resolves to do this. And as he does, I just think there's so much we can learn about the option of just following the pattern of everyone else scurrying around to see what we can do to kind of fix our pain. And then if that doesn't work, just complaining about it all because of course as Christians, that really should not be our option.

Matter of fact, if you know the Bible and I trust that you remember passages like Philippians 2:14 that says "you shouldn't do anything with grumbling or complaining." It should not be the manner of the Christian life in all circumstances. First Thessalonians 5. We should give thanks in all circumstances. We need to have a different approach, a much better approach. And you're going to see a spectacular response to Paul's pain in this text. So let's look at it together and see if we can't learn a few things we should be asking, some things we ought to be thinking, and then how we ought to act in situations where we find ourselves saying, "I wish my life were different, I wish this hadn't happened, I wish I didn't find myself in this pain



or have this diagnosis or have this trouble." But we are finding ourselves there. It doesn't seem to be changing. What do we do?

Let's look at the Apostle Paul's life starting in verse 37. I'll read it for you as you follow along from the English Standard Version. Here's what it says, "As Paul was about to go into the barracks." And if you look at any scene from the first century or the reconstruction of how things looked when the Romans were overseeing the Temple Mount, there was Antonia's Fortress that was in the corner there of pillars and built up. And it was a great place for the Romans to kind of look down on the Jews and what they were doing, kind of keep order. Of course, Rome was ultimately in charge and the Jews had some freedom. They had their own courts, they had their own things going on. But ultimately they couldn't do anything big without the permission of the Romans.

And as you remember, we had a riot on the Temple Mount because of the Apostle Paul. It caused such a stir there that the Romans had to intervene and they brought him up the steps here into the barracks, it's called, it's going to be an interrogation room where he's going to be interrogated. That's what's coming. But "he says to the tribune," the guy in charge, the head honcho shows up, the one who is in charge of the garrison of the Romans there, and Paul says, "May I say something to you?" And he says, the tribune does, in response to that, "Do you know Greek?" So we know he's saying this in Koine Greek. Koine Greek was the language of the common marketplace.

"Koine" in Greek just means "common." The common Greek of the day. There was Attic Greek that preceded that in the classical period of the Greeks, stuff that you might read in, you know, classes you take in rhetoric or whatever. You also had all kinds of other languages. You had, as we're going to see, Paul's going to address the people in Chapter 22 in Hebrew. There was a dialect of Hebrew that was kind of the common Jewish household language, which is the dialog in Hebrew called Aramaic. There was the old classical Hebrew that was still read on the scrolls of the Old Testament and that was spoken of and spoken in terms of the scholars and certainly Paul knew that language as well. There was Latin, of course, that the Romans spoke.

So there are lots of languages. A lot of people knew, you know, two, three, four languages in that day. And he's employing now a response to the Latin Roman leaders. He's responding in Greek. Now, that differentiates himself from someone that he's now responding to that there was some confusion, at least in the Roman's minds, as to who this was. Because if you read Josephus, who was the Jewish historian conscripted by Rome to write the history of the Jews and trying to chronicle everything and he was a bit of a turncoat, that's another story. But he tells the story of a lot of things that go on contemporaneous to New Testament times and Old Testament times. And he speaks of this revolt, this false prophet, this false messiah that had raised up. This is the scene he's talking about. He is from Egypt and he came in and there was a riot much like the one that was going on here. And Josephus writes all about it, including the 400 men who were involved in this.



But the tribune says, oh, you're speaking in Greek. "I guess you're not the Egyptian then, who recently stirred up a revolt that led 400 men of the assassins out into the wilderness?" And Paul goes, no, I'm not him. "Paul replied, 'I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city.'" And, of course, Tarsus, read your study Bibles or look at a Bible dictionary is certainly a prominent city in what is now the middle of Turkey, modern-day Turkey. And Paul is just stating that.

Now he can state a lot more. We're going to find out more about his background and his pedigree and his citizenship and some of it you know just by knowing your Bible. But he starts with this, I'm a Jew, I'm not an Egyptian and I'm speaking to you in Greek, of course, which is differentiating me from the Egyptian. I'm from an important city. And I'm just asking you, please, you're the authority right now, I'm in shackles, I beg you, permit me to speak to the people. "And when he had given him permission," so the leader of the Roman army here says, yes, you can speak to the people, "so Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language."

So he's going to the barracks there in Antonia's Fortress. He turns around as he's going up the steps and he speaks to the crowd. Now, you have to keep in mind in this text, which we don't think of if we just read it, you know, Sundays apart, is what he had just been through. Matter of fact, scroll back up at what's going on in the previous passage. I mean, you can start in verse 30, "Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple."

So you can picture the scene. Here he was, he was a Jewish seminary grad. He was on his track to be a part of the Sanhedrin, the ruling court of Israel. "And he's dragged out." I mean, his clothes, I'm sure, are not staying intact the way they were, you know, if not torn they're at least, you know, all scarred and scuffed and wrinkled as they're pulling him off by the scruff of his neck. "They shut the temple gates. They were seeking to kill him," verse 31. Drop down to the bottom, the last two words of verse 32. They were "beating Paul." And here the tribune had to go in with those Roman soldiers and stop them from beating him.

"Then the tribune came up," verse 33, "and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains." So just as Agabus said, as he illustrated with the leather belt of Paul, this was now coming through in two chains. So I'm picturing him being chained around his feet, being chained in his hands and now he's been dragged away with micro steps over to Antonia's Fortress. But the mob was so hostile toward Paul, it said they couldn't even walk him over there because it was a slow process. Verse 35 says, "he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd." And Luke says it wasn't just a crowd, it was a mob. "The mob of the people followed, crying out, 'Away with him!'"

Now you have to keep that in mind because when you see him here going to the barracks, arrested in chains, beaten. Now, I don't know if you got in fights in junior high or whatever. Fights broke out several times a day at my junior high school and maybe I got in one or two. We can talk about that another time. Sometimes winning, sometimes losing. But you know



what you feel like getting beat on. I had an older brother. He made that his sport. I know what it's like to get beat on and you do not feel like preaching at that point. But this is what he's going to do. He's going to ask the Roman official, hey, can I ask you a question? And it's going to get around to this question, can I speak to them?

Now, if you're being hauled off after a beating by a mob that wants to kill you, I just want to ask you the question. I mean, you're going to be on the phone with your attorney. You're going to be calling your friends. Bail me out of here. I can't believe what happened. You're going to do what everyone does when they go through a hard time, do things to try and alleviate your own pain and if it doesn't get fixed right away, or if it takes longer than you think, or even if it is getting fixed, you're probably going to complain about it because you're mad at all this stuff that's going on. Right? And you might be mad at people, you might be mad at attorneys, you might be mad at the cancer. You might be mad at your job. You might... I don't know what you're mad at. The economy, the president, you're mad.

But here's what the Apostle Paul does. He's asking, I'm thinking, just keep your mouth shut. Get into the barracks. There's safety in there. They're going to give you water. They're going to, I hope, just keep you away from the violent mob. And no, you want to say, hey, hey, hey, can I talk to these people? And because you know, you've read the book of Acts before, I trust. You may not remember all the details of Chapter 22 but let me just tell you, it's not some excoriating diatribe that he gives to these people. He turns around and shares his testimony. He shares the gospel with them. He's turning around to minister to the crowd who just beat him up.

Now I'm thinking, what do I do when I'm in pain? What do I do when I get some diagnosis or I go through some financial setback or I got relational problems or things at work are falling apart? I don't have this as a natural reaction. This is a mature and godly reaction, and it is a helpful reaction. And Paul is saying how can I help in this situation? And I want to help starting with these people that we know in his heart he cared for, Romans 9, Romans Chapter 10. He cared for them. He prayed for them. He wanted them saved. They were misunderstanding who he was and he wanted to minister to them. Can I speak to them? And that's what Chapter 22 is all about.

Chapter 22 is about him sharing this message that he's going to share. We'll look at it in the next series in detail. It's just a big deal. And I would say this: you're going through a valley, going through a hard time. You're struggling. Things are not going right financially, relationally, legally, medically, whatever it is, you're starting to feel that pinch or you're going to feel it next week, next month, next year. Here's what you should do. You should ask this question. Number one, you should say, "How Can I Serve Amid this Pain?" It's painful, but how can I serve in the middle of this pain?

Because here was what pain generally does. It puts you in a new position, usually surrounded with new people and new environments and opportunities. And you need to say, is this painful circumstance now opening up an opportunity for me? What can I do to serve? Now, that's not our natural reaction. We care about ourselves. We care about our own comfort. We care



about our own relief. And here the Apostle Paul is saying, and we should follow this great exhortation, "follow me as I follow Christ." And do you know what Christ was all about? Most of his ministry was done during people who were hating him and people who were persecuting him. He said, "I came to serve. I didn't come to be served. I came to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many."

And Paul, he's not going to die on a cross for anyone's sins, but he's going to serve and he's going to spend and be expended for the souls of people around him. And when pain comes into his life, none of that is off the table. It's just a new opportunity, a new environment, a new situation in which he can serve. He's a missionary. He's a preacher. Right? You're still always going to use your words, I'm sure, in whatever service you do. But you need to ask yourself the question. Okay, I didn't expect this. I didn't expect to be stuck here or put into this or have this problem or be on dialysis or whatever you're going through. But what can you do in that situation? How can I serve? That's the godly response.

That's going to take a few things. So let's build some sub-points here. Number one, here's what it's going to take -- you believing in the sovereignty of God. Now, I know that was earlier in our series, but let me just re-emphasize that. You have to believe in the sovereignty of God. Sovereignty. Right? God's administration of all things. God is a God who is not saying this, and you know this theologically, but you need to know it personally, that God is not going, "Oh, no. Paul just got arrested on the Temple Mount. Oh dear. Plan B. Plan B. What do we do now?" Right? God is not stressing about that. He's not wringing his hands. And you know, he's not thinking that about you when you get a cancer diagnosis. He's not thinking that when you get the pink slip and you get laid off at work, when you get evicted, when you get served papers, he's not going, "Ah, man. Poor guy. Tom, I didn't think that would happen to him. I can't believe it. What do we do? Angels, we need a meeting. What are we going to do?" Why? Because God is sovereign.

See, Job feels the pain of all the terrible things that are happening. Thieves steal his stuff, a storm kills his kids, right? Whatever it was in his body, bacteria, attacks his flesh. But here's the thing we know about the book of Job, which is true in every circumstance of suffering in your life. All of it is on the leash of God. All of it is on the leash of God. God is distributing this and allowing this only insofar as he allows it. And this is how it is. Even as Martin Luther liked to say, "Satan is God's Satan, it's the Lord's Satan. And he operates on the leash that God allows." So nothing has happened to you that is a surprise.

We've dealt with this earlier in the series, but not a bird falls from a tree apart from your Father. None of this happens without God's oversight. Nothing is outside the purview of God. Your divorce, your cancer, your job, the fact that you can't afford a house or you can't have a baby or whatever your problem is that you're stressing about that is your valley of the shadow of death. I'm not minimizing the pain. You should have pain. Pain is real. We're not Christian Scientists here, right? We understand the reality of evil and we grieve over that. And it hurts. And we recognize the pain of all of that. But we understand this. First of all, we believe that God is sovereign.



Now, let me remind you of something that all of these trials should do for us. Jot this down, James Chapter 1 verse 2. Just start there in your minds, and I want you to know this passage, but let me quote it for you. It says that we ought to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials. "Consider it all joy, my brothers," he says, so these are Christians he's talking to, "when we encounter trials of various kinds." So you have all kinds of trials. And do you know what the next line is? Because "you need to know that the testing of your." What's the next word? "Faith." So all the previous valleys, all the times the turns and twists of your life took you into a dark, shadowy time, do you know what you should have come out with? Increasing faith. Deepening faith. Sterling faith. Tested faith. Forged faith.

And you're saying I now believe that God is not only sovereign, but God is good and he's knowledgeable and he knows what's going on. He not only knows it, but he's planned it all from the beginning. As Psalm 139 says, there's not a day of my life that was not planned out. "How vast is the sum of God's thoughts toward me!" as one poetic way it's put. And it says, all the days of my life were written in a book, so to speak, even before there was yet one of them.

So I know this. There's nothing that God says, "Ah, I can't believe I happened to Mike." Not a single time God thinks that. Because all of this is working out a plan out of God's CEO's office where he works everything after the council of his will. So you need to build in every conflict, every difficulty, you need to say, I need to have the faith to believe that the God that I am serving, the Good Shepherd that I'm following, that none of this is a surprise, even when your boneheaded decisions are contributing to the problem.

And you know how that works, right? Sometimes you think, well, it can't be God's will because I caused all this and I'm so stupid and I've repented of all the things that led me into this. I understand that. But this is the mystery of God's sovereignty over all things. He even uses the evil and the wicked and the sinful things to put you in a place that right now in that valley of the shadow of whatever you're in, you need to say, okay, this is the environment that God's put me into. I know this that I can still ask God, okay, God, how do I serve in this? What do I do here?

The testing of your faith produces... Do you know the next word? What is it? Depending on the translation, quote the Greek for me. It produces what? "Hupomoné." I've said that enough from the platform. That was a test to see if you remember the Greek word. Right? The testing of your faith produces hupomoné. The reason I like to teach you that Greek word, it is a compound word, "hupo" means "under," "moné means "to remain." Hupomoné means that you can bear up under the difficulties.

So the trials and the difficulties test my faith. And I start thinking, "Oh, God, where are you?" I start wondering if God's even a good God, or if God even knows what's going on. But we come out of it and go, "No, I know God knows. And I understand that God is good and God is sovereign and God is in control." And so we come out stronger and we're stronger still for the next bend in the road, the next diagnosis, the next, you know, crisis that I face.



And so we have now endurance so that we can be, here's another Greek word, "Teleios" which means "perfect." It's translated in the English Standard Version. Perfect. Teleios, I've often talked about this word. If I were to write a Greek lexicon of the vocabulary of the New Testament, I've said this before, but the word teleios, next to that, I would put... Well, let me illustrate that. Dad always used to give me tools. So many tools that I kept buying toolboxes. First it was just a box, and then it was a box with drawers. And then it was like, you know, the Costco full-blown, you know, a stand-up tool chest. And then I got two of those in my garage now. I know it's crazy because I have no time to use all those tools, but it's full of tools. Tools of all kinds. Tools I don't even know what they're for. But over the years I've collected all kinds of tools and in my garage I've got tools.

And so something breaks at my house on a Monday, that's the day to fix everything. And I, of course, go to YouTube. That's why YouTube exists, to learn how to fix things. And so I look at it and the guy goes, "Here's what you need," and it looks so easy on YouTube, by the way. But they lay out the tools and they say, "Here's the tool you need. If you want to get this under the sink then you got to have this kind of facet remover tool, special thing. And then when they show me the tool I go like, "Ah, that looks familiar. I've seen that." And so I go out into the garage and I hunt and I go through five or six drawers. They're not very organized, but I find it, there it is.

And then sure enough, I take that tool and I get under that sink and I get on my back after I laid the towel down to keep my back from hurting and I get up in there and sure enough, that's it. It takes that faucet off and "Ahhh!" It's the word teleios, perfect, right? It's just right. And if I'm going to write a lexicon next to it, it's the word "Ahhh." I just love it when the tool goes right on the problem. It's like, click. That's it. That's it. Teleios. So here's the thing. God is getting you ready to be perfect. Teleios. That means you're just right for what's coming, just right for what's next, right? And lacking in nothing.

I'm quoting this from memory but you know the passage, right? Think of all the totality of it. You're supposed to "consider it joy, my brothers, when you encounter trials of various kinds, knowing that the testing of your faith produces" endurance, hupomoné, and that having that endurance, you can "let it have its perfect result," it can move into fruition so "that you can be" right, just right, teleios, perfect, ready for whatever comes next, adequate and prepared for every good work. So you're ready. So all of these things, I'm just saying, including the arrest on the Temple Mount for the Apostle Paul was all a part of God doing what he's doing. Nothing's outside the purview of God's sovereignty and God is continuing to work out his purpose.

Now, we started the series four weeks ago with this dreary, dark path, a painful path. And we started quoting a verse that if you quote it too quick in the middle of someone's pain, they start being frustrated about it. But it's true, Romans 8:28, that "God works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." That phrase, that line "called according to his purpose," reminds me that God is going to work together for good all the things that the Christian, that I love God, is going to encounter for his purpose, "called according to HIS purpose."



So I know this: God's got a purpose for the Apostle Paul. And guess what was a part of that? To be arrested and beaten on the Temple Mount to turn around and talk to the people who just beat him in the face and threw things at him and cursed him or did whatever they did to show derision toward Paul. And he was now going to be halfway up the steps by the time the garrison, the leader of the army, would allow him to speak. And he's going to turn now and motion with his hands probably chained up still or, I don't know, maybe he got the shackles taken off, and he motions with his hands and they're all going, "That's the guy we just threw stuff at, that's the guy we just beat." And he's going to turn around and he starts to preach and he's going to share his testimony. That's what's going on in Chapter 22.

That's an amazing thing. And all of that was working together to fulfill the purpose of the Apostle Paul that started in Acts Chapter 9 when we learned that God was going to take Paul from his opposition to the Church to be the number one spokesman for the Church. And he was going to preach, he was going to speak, "he was going to bear the name of Christ to the kings and to the Gentiles and to the Jews." And here he was fulfilling his purpose. So when you get cancer, when you have a problem, when there's some difficulty in your life, when you end up getting divorced and you never planned to. You have some, you know, issue and problem where you can't work in the field that you got trained to work in. Whatever the issue is, you get fired. You just need to say God's purpose for me is in no way, no way obscured by my circumstances of pain.

Pain does not obscure his purpose for you, right? It gives you the playing field and the opportunity that he had planned from eternity past for you to live that out. Now we're going to figure that out. Here's a text. You got to write this one down it's so good, Second Timothy Chapter 2 verse 9. Just write the verse down. Let me read it for you. Paul says because I was preaching the gospel, he says, "I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal." And he's not complaining. He's just saying here's the situation and here's how I know he's not complaining because he says, "But the word of God is not bound!" Right? That's just a great line.

"I am bound as a criminal and I'm suffering here. But here's the deal. God's purpose is not bound because God's purpose with me is to get the word of God out through me. So it's getting done. God's getting his purpose done even when I have these problems, even when I have this pain, even with the thorn in my flesh that I prayed reflexively would go away. It hasn't gone away. I'm still struggling. I'm still suffering."

My spouse has died. My house I was in... Whatever the situation. Now I'm saying this is a divine opportunity for me to fulfill my purpose. How can I do that? By the way, back in your minds to James Chapter 1 after he says you've got to think about your trials as the forging of your faith so that you can be ready to do whatever God has you to do. God's going to have you do those things within the trial. And when you come out of the trial, it says this: "Now, if any of you lacks wisdom," do you know that verse? "Let him ask of God."

And now let me see if I can quote from memory here the next part, who maybe sometimes might possibly give you some wisdom (audience laughing) if you don't mess it up like you did





last time with the wisdom he gave you. Is that how that verse goes? Correct me now Sunday school grads, "who gives to all," not just missionaries and pastors and theologians, "he gives to all generously without reproach." He doesn't say what did you do with the wisdom I gave you last time? I can't believe you're back to ask for more wisdom. "No reproach." "Generously without reproach."

But you got to ask without doubt. So you need the faith to say to God, "God help me now." How can I take this trial, this struggle, how can I be useful in this? How can I help? How can I be salt and light? How can I be your ambassador? Ambassador in chains. Ambassador in a hospital room. Ambassador in an empty house without my husband. How can I be the ambassador you want me to be? You've got to ask that question. And don't just ask it of yourself although if you have some history in the Scripture, and history of walking with grace, some things might immediately flood your mind. But do what it says there in James Chapter 1 verse 5. Ask for wisdom. Because God says he gives generously. You just got to ask.

But don't ask like you don't think you're going to get it. "I'll give you wisdom." That's such a great passage. "He gives generously to all without reproach." But you better ask without doubt. If you're doubter, "you're like the waves of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind." So we need to know this. Your trial, whether it's right now, next week, next month, or maybe even the one you came out of, it was all a part of God's plan. And it is going to be useful for God fulfilling his purpose in you, that's just a fundamental bottom line foundational predication of everything that we teach as Christians, because that's what the Bible says. God revealed himself that way. And all of this needs to be seen as an opportunity, a divine opportunity. Ask how can I serve amidst this pain. So, so important.

Now back to our text and weird stuff starts happening. This multi-lingual seminary grad is going to ask the Roman who knows Latin, he's going to ask him in Greek, "Hey. Can I say something to you?" And he goes, "You're speaking in Greek." Now, I don't know if Paul thought he was being mistaken for the Egyptian. I doubt it, but maybe. I don't know. But God certainly uses the fact that he's going to speak in Greek. This is an important thing. If you look at all the commentaries, try and see all the nuances of this. But he doesn't stay in Greek. He goes on now to say in Hebrew everything he's going to say in Chapter 22, and there is some debate about whether that's the Hebrew dialect. Is that the dialect of Aramaic? Was that the common household language of the Jews, or was that maybe the scholarly language of the, you know, the learned scholars of Judaism? It doesn't matter. All we see in this text is there's clearly a shift, a shift in terms of language.

And even in the way he speaks to him. He doesn't just turn around and start talking to the crowd. He asks the authority and he says, "I beg you." I mean, look at the middle of this passage when the tribune says, "You're not the Egyptian?" Paul says, "No, I'm a Jew. Tarsus. Cilicia. A citizen of no obscure city." So even that's bolstering this request. It's not like I'm nobody here. I come from an important city, an outpost of Rome. And I beg you, permit me to speak. I beg you, permit me. Give me permission to speak. Even the deference he shows to kings and those in authority, in this case, the tribune who's in charge of the Roman soldiers. I just beg you, sir, please let me speak to this crowd that just beat me up.



Just a lot of finesse here and a lot of interesting moves, even in language, to show Paul's thinking very strategically about this. Okay? Because he wants to be effective. Number one, he wants the right response because he wants to serve. So he's going to do things to set it up so that he can serve. He's going to ask with the right kind of deference and polite request to the Roman soldier. He's going to think, well, I got to do this. Now is the time. I'm going to talk to these people. But now I'm going to shift the language to Hebrew because that's going to mean something in a certain way. It's going to speak to them, even though they're tri-lingual, I'm sure there on the Temple Mount. There's a lot of strategy going on here.

Why? Because, like us, we need to, number two, think, in this trap, "How Can I Be Most Effective?" And Paul's mind is going, how can I be most effective right here in this situation? And for him, he's going to shift. He's going to defer. He's going to ask. He's going to move. He's going to act. He's going to do all the things we're going to look at later. But he's thinking. He's like Jesus said, to be as shrewd as serpents. He's not just blurting out, well, I just want to share the gospel with people. He's setting this up in a very important way.

We're going to need some help with that. Let me think biblically about four different things that will help us. Four words. Just four words. Okay? Here's the first word. If I'm going to look at my situation and say how now can I be most effective in serving the purposes of God in my life right now? Assuming now the context of this whole series is I'm in pain. That in particular, although this would apply even if you're having the best, most rosy season of your Christian life.

But I should ask these things. I should have these four words. Let's use them as verbs, as imperative verbs. Here's the first one. ASSESS. You need to assess, assess. You need to look at a situation and basically ask what are the needs here. What are the needs? Think with me on this. What are the needs? You find yourself in a situation, you say, okay, what are the needs? That's what assessment is about. It's the discerning nature. Like Second Chronicles said about the men of Issachar. Remember the 12 tribes of Israel. The men of Issachar, the particular leaders who were going to consult the leadership, the king. It says the men of Issachar, here's what it says, "Understood the times and they knew what Israel should do." Good to have advisers like that. They know the situation and now they know based on the situation what Israel should do.

Now, that's good on a national level. And we should sit in committee meetings, I suppose, thinking about church planting or thinking about missions work overseas, and we should strategically think about those things on the big scale, just like the men of Issachar. Knowing the times, like what's the best thing to do? What's the best way to go about it? How should we assess what the needs are? That's helpful. But I want us to think that way individually about my own life. I'm going to look at my life and say right now what are the opportunities and the needs that people have? Not me. I know my need. I'd like to get out of the pain.

But assuming that that's not my first priority, what are the needs here of the people? And that's so helpful for us to be able to very carefully assess what's going on. We don't have time



to look at this passage. By the way, that Issachar statement is in First Chronicles 12, 12:32. Even the next tribe in that passage speaks of the men of Zebulun, the men of war. They had a certain strength and David was able to put them to a particular purpose.

But let's get here on Ephesians Chapter 4. Ephesians 4. Just drop this down to verses 28 and 29. Verse 29 in particular is one that's right at the heart of this. Let me start with that one. It says that we ought to, it's going to necessitate an assessment, "Let no corrupting talk come out of our mouths." So no vulgarity, we don't want to hear, you know, you dropping F-bombs. You need to have good speech. But it says no, you need to not just think about taking the bad stuff out of your speech. It says, "but speak only what is good for building up as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear."

So there's assessment that's going on in every conversation. And what I'm saying is you find yourself in a situation you don't want to be in, I'm saying, okay, I'm going to say how can I serve? How can I serve people? How can I serve God's purpose with those people? And now I'm saying, okay, how can I most effectively do that? I got to start with assessment. Like, what are the needs here?

Number two, here's the second word, Letter "B," I need to PRIORITIZE. You start assessing. You take out a piece of paper on your laptop, so to speak, and you pull the document up and you start writing or you pull out a tablet and you start thinking, what are the needs in this situation? Those need to now after you've finished writing as many as you can, you need to say let me put these in an order of priority.

Now Paul's going to share the gospel in Chapter 22. And that, by the way, for evangelical Christians should be at the top priority of everyone's list. I mean, the end of time, let's say you're attached to some physical therapy after some car accident, you're in pain and you find yourself in months of therapy. Well, here you're surrounded by people you wouldn't normally just go to if you were healthy. So you should say, okay, what are the needs? It would be great if the guy who's taking me through my physical therapy who had faith in Christ. So let me talk to him. Or you find out maybe he's a Christian, you think well, well does he go to church? Why? You make sure he gets plugged into a church.

You can create the needs list, but then you need to say what's most important. If the guy needs, like, I don't know, something fixed on his car and you know how to do it. Well, that's something that can be done, but it's not as important as whether or not he's going to heaven or not. So we start to prioritize what should become my first and most important thing to do. There are a lot of things Paul could have done in this situation, but he's going to deal with their spiritual welfare by talking about Christianity and how they can be saved. And as ambassadors of Christ that's always at the top of the list. Yes, we're supposed to be salt. Yes, we're supposed to be light. But first and foremost, we're ambassadors of Christ. So that is always going to categorize things at the top.

Matter of fact, let me quote another passage that you know, a familiar text we quote all the time. Matthew Chapter 6 verses 32 and 33. And I want to take this paradigm of prioritizing



and take it out of the context that Jesus gave it in, which is anxiety. And he says, listen, when people are anxious, here's what you see other people do. Here's the normal response. "The Gentiles chase after all these things." What are we going to wear? What are we going to eat? Where are we going to live? They're worried about making sure they're not sitting there thinking about I don't often have enough to retire. So they go out there and make sure they have everything in place.

Well, that parallels a lot of what we're talking about here in terms of pain. When we have pain the average person is thinking, well, how can we fix it? What can I do to fix it? How do you get out of trouble? Call the attorney or I'm sick. I got to call the specialist and I've got to find the homeopathic solutions and I got to see what they got going on in Tijuana that might be able to help. Whatever. On and on and on we go. And all I'm saying is, listen, here's the next line. It starts with a contrastive conjunction in verse 33. Gentiles chase after the solutions they need, I got to fix this. Here's what Jesus speaking to his disciples now at the crowds, they're listening to him. He says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. God will take care of all that in whatever measure he wants to.

And I'm not saying you shouldn't go to the doctor if you get your leg cut off. You probably should seek some help for that. (audience laughs) But thanks. But here's the thing. You need to realize that your whole thing about like how can I get back to peak performance? And I want to do that, you know, 5K next year and whatever. This is a silly illustration at this point, but you need to say that's not my top priority. My top priority is to seek first the kingdom. It's not that I don't care about what I'm going to wear or if I have enough to retire. Okay, those are legitimate concerns. But the Gentiles, and it's a strong verb, I always translate it when I quote it offhand as "chase." I think the English Standard Version may say "run after" all these things, but it's like they're desperate for it.

Well, Christians should seek first the kingdom of God. And I'd say the same thing in pain. You're struggling. It's not like Paul's just rushing in there to find an attorney to get him out. Or let's get a bunch of Christians together to fix it. It's like, no, let's not think about my thing immediately. Let's think about the need. And so he's prioritizing the need. And the need really at the top of the list is not his own comfort. It's not his own release. It's what are the needs of the people around and what are the most important needs in those people. So you have to assess needs. You have to prioritize. Okay?

Here's another one. Let's just put it this way. You have to STRATEGIZE. As long as I already quoted the verse, "We need to be shrewd as serpents." We need to strategize about the effective way in which we fix this problem. They have a need. How do I fix it? And Paul is assembling in his mind, clearly in this whole passage, not only about what he's going to say, but the languages he's going to say it in. What exactly do I do? What exactly do I say? How do I do this? Strategizing.

Now I say all that because the Bible says that, Colossians Chapter 4 verses 5 and 6. We ought to "walk in wisdom toward outsiders." And Paul is certainly surrounded by outsiders at this point, hostile Jews down below, you know, arresting Romans all around him. It says, but



"make the best use of the time." What's the opportunity? No, do the best thing. Do the most important thing. Then he says, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer each person." So you need to think clearly about taking this and most effectively doing that.

Now, when I say that you need to think about it. You're in a pain. You're in a painful trial. How do I meet the needs of people around me? How do I prioritize those? And now I say, how do I best get those things done? How do I best address those needs? Here's what I'm telling you. Yes, we need to plan. Yes, we need to think. Yes, we need to be shrewd. But let me give you one more passage. This is worth looking at. Go with me to Luke Chapter 12. Luke Chapter 12. It says in verses 11 and 12, Luke 12:11-12 that it's going to happen. You're going to have opposition, you're going to have painful trials. And in this case, just like Paul, you're going to be brought in "before synagogues and rulers and authorities," and he says, "do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself."

Now, it doesn't say you shouldn't think about it, of course you should think about it but, "I'm not going to be anxious about it or what you should say." Should you prep something in your head? Of course you should. But you should not be anxious about it. Why? Because you know this. You're not prepping alone. Because this isn't a purpose about your comfort. This is the purposes of God's objectives in the people around you. When you go to that place to deal with that situation, God has purposes and you're just trying to align yourself with those purposes. So the Holy Spirit certainly cares. "For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

So I'm strategizing, but I always strategize with faith. I always strategize with the belief that God wants to get this done more than I do. If I'm trying to take my interest and my efforts and direct them to what are the needs in this situation now that I find myself in this trial, I know this: God's Spirit certainly wants to get that done. God's Spirit certainly wants to help me know how to do it. What do I say? What's the best way to do it? What's the most efficient way to do it? We need to assess. We need to prioritize. We need to strategize.

And just because this is happening even with the change of language, which takes me back to a principle we've already camped on. So real quickly, let me just use this word. We need to CONTEXTUALIZE in the best sense of the word. First Corinthians Chapter 9 verse 22, we need to contextualize. "To the weak. I became like the weak," after a long list of what he has become in whatever context he's in, "so that I might, by all means win some." "Become all things to all men that I might, by all means win some." He is going to try to make this work on every level. Do you think he cared about the Romans in the conversation? Of course. Do you think he cared about those Jews? Yes! And he was going to contextualize his message in every situation.

If you don't think that's a biblical concept, I would just tell you to go through the gospels and look at Jesus encountering non-Christians and him sharing the gospel, with tax collectors, with Zacchaeus, with the woman at the well, the Samaritan. Just look at every time he's sharing the gospel, with a rich young ruler, you will never find him sharing that message the



same exact way twice. You just won't. He's always contextualized. It doesn't mean the truth changes. It doesn't. But his method, his approach. And you need to give more thought, not just how you can get out of your pain or how you can complain about your problem, but God, how can I be useful in this? And it starts with you saying I want this to be an effective use of my life in this trial. Assess, prioritize, strategize and contextualize.

Verse 40. Back to our passage if you turned anywhere, I think you did, I think I had to turn. Acts Chapter 21 verse 40. "And when he," that's the tribune, the one in charge, "gave him permission," that's Paul getting permission, "Paul, standing there on the steps, motioned with his hand." Now, remember, he's probably got a split lip. His eye is probably starting to swell. I mean, I don't know how bad he looked. His clothes certainly weren't looking the best. He didn't look like he did when he got up in the morning. I mean, he's been through a riot, "he motions with his hand to the people. And there was a great hush." You can imagine, even if you were throwing stuff at this guy, this guy's turn around, he's going to say something to you. "And there was a great hush, and he addressed them in the Hebrew language." Even that strategy there we've seen that.

But he is now going to... I just want you to notice what you would want to do and what he is doing. Two different things. I don't want to preach a sermon of forgiveness and grace to people who have just been beaten on me. That's why Jonah didn't want to speak to the Assyrians. Why? Because the Assyrians were beaten on the Israelites. He didn't want to turn and give them a message of faith and repentance. He didn't want that. And yet Paul was doing this very unnatural thing. Let me see how I can help these people, even the people who have caused the trouble. Right?

Think about that. That's just an amazing approach to the problem. And he does it not tomorrow, not next week, not next year. He's doing it right now on the way up, up the stairs to the Antonia Fortress. He's about to go into the barracks where he can get a little relief from people throwing things at him. And instead, right now, right here, halfway up the stairs, "I want to talk to them. I want to help them." That's a big deal.

I would say this: we need to act in that way. Let's put it this way. Number three, you need to "Act: When and While You Can," because your actions in your trial shouldn't wait until you've dried all your tears. They shouldn't wait till you feel healthy. They shouldn't wait until you feel cared for. They shouldn't wait until you're on the outside end of this or until you see the light at the end of the tunnel. Start serving now. Start evangelizing now. Start helping now. Start being a blessing now. Even in the middle of your pain. Do it now.

Because here's why. A few things. You see the questions on the back of the printed worksheet or you scroll down on the digital worksheet. I've got those questions every week. I give you five questions. Look at the first question. I got three verses there. You already have them, you don't even need to write them down. But let me read these to you real quick. Here's one reason you should do it now, even if you're in pain. Because, Psalm 39 verse 4, we should understand that God has given us life but life on this playing surface of the earth,



right? This life we have is temporal. "Lord, make me know my end." I'm not living forever here on this planet. "And what is the measure of my days; just remind me how fleeting I am!"

And even the next line. "Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths." Do you know what a handbreadth is? It's the length between the thumb and the longest finger. It's a small measure that they used, like, "Hey, would you move that picture over four handbreadths from the corner?" I mean, it's just a small measurement. They weren't carrying tape measures around. My life is like that on the wall of time, right? I'm just a little handbreadth. "My lifetime is nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands before you as a mere breath." Even as James says in James 5, he says, you know, it's just like we should be careful what we think about in terms of long-term planning because our life is like a vapor. Here for a little while then it's gone.

So one of the reasons we should act now and pain should not be a reason for procrastination is that our lives are short. We don't know how much time we have. We don't want to think, you know, I can wait to do this good deed. I can wait to share the gospel. I can wait to deal with this. I can wait to utilize my gifts. I'm going to wait till a green pastures and still waters season of my life. Don't wait. How about this one? Matthew 24. That's the second verse in that first question I'll make you look up in your small groups. Jesus is talking about his return. He says, "Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." And when it does, it's done. The bell goes off.

I mean, at some point God has on his calendar the bells going off and we don't know when it is. I remember as a kid, 3:00 man, I would watch that clock for the last 5 minutes of the day, every day. I'd drill a hole with my eyeballs right on that clock. And I knew as soon as that 2:59 was done and that government clock snapped on to the three, the bell was going to ring and I knew it. But the thing is I have no idea. I mean, I can think well surely sometime mid-afternoon Christ is coming back. But you don't know. Some of you sitting here listening to me talk about your death, you say, "You know, I'm in my twenties. It's going to be a long time." You don't know. It could be Thursday and your life is over because Christ's going to come back and be dispatched by the Father to get his Church. And when that happens your opportunities for good are over.

All the good that you should be doing, all the blessings that you should be providing, all the evangelism you're supposed to be doing, everything that you could do is going to be over. And if your pain is becoming something that is justifying you kicking the can down the road for you doing what you know you should do, I'm just telling you we just got to stop with all that.

And I often quote this one, but I put it on your worksheet anyway. John Chapter 9 verse 4. It's the screensaver on my laptop. "We," that's not just Jesus. "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day because night is coming when no one can work." So I know whether it's the return of Christ or my death, my opportunity for doing the work that God sent me to do is temporal, it's fleeting. Every opportunity is fleeting. And if you think, "Well, I was going to do this for the Lord, but now everything's changed." Well, it doesn't. Nothing has



changed that God did not sovereignly put in your path. Now, he's asking you to fulfill your purpose in that pain. Don't wait. Don't procrastinate.

I just love that: "We must do the works of him," the Father, "who sent me while it is day because night is coming when no one can work." So you might as well get to it now. What is it you want to do? What is it you need to do? What do you know has to be done to fulfill your purpose as a Christian in your little sphere of the world? Well, this isn't the sphere I thought I would be in. I thought I would be married. I thought I'd have kids. I thought I'd live in a bigger house. I thought... Whatever you thought it isn't happening. But what should be happening is that the purpose of God in your life should not be shackled by the difficulties and pains or health problems that you have. Fulfill your purpose and do it now. All the opportunities are fleeting.

Here's one just to throw on top of all that, Galatians Chapter 6 verse 10. Galatians 6:10, he says, "So then, as we have opportunity," I just love that, "let us do good to everyone, especially to those who are of the household of faith." What is it? A lot of people sit back and have all these intentions of what they would do. And the Bible is so clear. Right? Do it as soon as you see the opportunity. The door cracks open just do it.

What about this one, Luke 21? Luke 21, it's the passage I started last week with when I talked about Jesus saying there's going to be "Nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom, great earthquakes, famines, pestilence," all that's going to happen, "terrors." And then he says this: "But before this they're going to lay hands on you, they're going to persecute you, they are going to deliver you up to the synagogues and the prisons, and you'll be brought before kings and governors for my namesake." Paul's experiencing that right here in his trap. He says, I love this, "This will be your opportunity to bear witness." That's just a great line.

All the bad stuff that's going to happen against the backdrop of all the bad stuff that's going to happen in culture, "this will be your opportunity." You've got to see the struggle that you're in as an opportunity. You have to see the valley of the shadow of death as an opportunity. You've got a job to do. We've got to act when and while we can. And all of that is fleeting.

One more passage, please. First Peter Chapter 4. First Peter Chapter 4. All these things kind of tie together in this great text about our stewardship. Start in verse 7 with me, follow along as I read this great text. First Peter Chapter 4 verse 7, "The end of all things is at hand." At any moment, the return of Christ or my death, I just know it can be over any time. "Therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers." You ought to be praying for wisdom and you ought to be praying for boldness, you ought to be praying to fulfill your purpose. "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly." It's not talking about finding relief and a comfortable life for you and tranquility and comfort and peace. What you need to do is to love. You got to love the lost by sharing the gospel, you ought to love Christians by doing the things that God has equipped you to do. "Love covers a multitude of sins." Even evangelism is going to blot out a multitude of sins.





So no excuses with problems and offense. But ultimately, you got to get to work is what you're supposed to do. Verse 9, "Show hospitality to one another without complaining." People sometimes complain, "Well, if I had a bigger house. We could do more. If I just had to..." Stop. Just do what you're supposed to do. Be kind. That word, by the way, hospitality, is loving outsiders. Get people in your sphere and start to serve them that you wouldn't normally, like Paul is with Roman soldiers and with Jews who want to kill him. "As each has received a gift." Paul's a preacher. He's about to preach. "Use it to serve one another." That's the whole tenor of this whole sermon. "As good stewards of God's varied grace." What can you do in this situation? What are the needs? I've assessed them, I've prioritized them, I've strategized them, I'm going to contextualize and I'm going to go and get this done.

"Whoever speaks." Hey, you better speak like it matters, like you're pulling back the curtains of heaven to show people God. That's what oracle means. It's like you ought to speak as though it matters. You ought to speak so that people listen. And the great hush comes over the crowd and Paul's going to lay it on. Not to castigate them, but to share the gospel.

Verse 11, "Whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies." And how does he serve? Do you want to talk about going the extra mile, staying that extra hour, spending that extra dollar? The rich God, the powerful God, the God who never gets tired. That God's doing all kinds of things he wants to endow us with. If you're going to serve you might as well go to the wall with your service. You might as well stay the extra hour. You might as well spend the extra dollar. You might as well do whatever it takes. Go the extra mile. You got to do it. It's like God is empowering you, "In order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever."

It's like the Dayspring card that just keeps getting higher and more lofty in this last sentence. And then you might think, "Well, that sounds great. And I can just imagine doing that when everything is tranquil and there are green pastures and there are still waters. Yes, I want to do that. But I'm just... I can't do it. I can't do it with this stuff I'm dealing with." "Beloved," verse 12, "do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though some strange thing were happening to you." All of what's said in verses 7 through 11 are certainly true even if you're in the middle of a fiery trial. That's the whole point of this series in Chapter 21 of Acts. "But rejoice insofar as you share in Christ's suffering."

By the way, when Jesus said, "I've come to serve, not to be served but to serve." Did that service come when he was walking by still waters and in green pastures? Most of it was in the valley of the shadow of death, where people were throwing rocks at him, when people were wanting to kill him. How much of the ministry of Christ took place when he was encountering opposition? Like most of it. And I'm just saying if you're waiting till things get better, now's the time.

"Rejoice insofar as you share in Christ's suffering." He was a servant in the midst of his suffering. I want to serve in the midst of my suffering, "that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed," because he's going to say attaboy. That's exactly what I wanted.



That's what I did. That's what Paul did. That's what you did on the other side of the globe, 2,000 years later. Attaboy. And you can rejoice when you hear that kind of commendation.

It doesn't matter if it's insult, it doesn't matter. God's blessing sets on you. I just love that: "You are blessed, because the Spirit of glory, the greatness of God rests upon you." You've got to act when and while you're able. You've got to trust God to make the difference. He can. God can work through what you say. God can work through what you do. You just have to be saying, I want to align myself with his purposes.

D.L. Moody was uneducated, largely self-taught just in the Bible. He used bad grammar. Some of his theology was a bit whacked, but he was committed to seeing people brought to faith in Christ. And he shared the gospel with one guy who came to faith under his ministry. He was a Cambridge student. He was a star athlete in Cambridge athletics. He was a trust-fund baby. He had all kinds of money endowed to him. And he was the rich young ruler, if you will, of Moody's ministry, one of them. And unlike the rich young ruler of Matthew 19, this young guy, he listened to the gospel and he responded.

And he had everything that would make his life comfortable, everything to make his life convenient. And he said, you know, what is the need? He assessed the needs. And he started because of his life choices, because he decided to follow Christ a lot of his life got way, way harder. You should look up his story. But he goes on to say where are the needs? And in his day, the biggest need in the world that was talked about was the need in China. It was like the gospel wasn't going anywhere in China. So he got involved in missions in China. And this guy put all this comfort aside to say, I want to be useful to God. He strategized. He was smart and the work that God did through this guy, very, very impactful. You should read about him.

He had a great name, by the way, for a college athlete with a lot of money. His name was Studd. Do you like that name? C.T. Studd, look him up. About 130 years ago. He did great things for the Lord. But he wrote a little poem and that poem has been set to music and that poem, maybe you've heard it, is a good summation of all we see here Paul doing in Acts 21. He called his poem Only One Life. And that's really all you got, right? Here's one of the most poignant lines. "Only one life, yes only one. Soon will its fleeting hours be done; Then in 'that day' my Lord to meet. And stand before his judgment seat; Only one life, 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."

What won't last is you're complaining. What won't last is all the failed remedies to try and fix your problems. But what will matter is how you glorify God in the midst of those troubles. Just whatever the fiery trial might be. If you're not going through it, you will. And when you're there don't back off the gas pedal for trying to serve the Lord. Be like C.T. Studd and say, I'm going to work to see if I can spend and be expended to be useful to the master wherever I find the greatest need. To do that regardless of your pain, "only one life will soon be past, only what's done for Christ 'twill last."



It reminds me of the great lines of Paul as he sat in prison in Philippians Chapter 1, and he says, I'm just resolved, here's the paraphrase, I'm resolved that no matter what, I'm going to glorify Christ, whether by life or by death, whether this works out well for me or whether it doesn't. I just want Christ to be glorified. Because why? Because "for me to live is Christ." And if this thing kills me in prison for preaching there, "to die..." You know the verse, verse 21, "is gain." We have nothing to lose here. There's temporal discomfort and pain involved. But let's give our all to serve him in the midst of whatever you might be walking through.

Let's pray. God, this series, I hope, has been helpful for us as we think about the pains and problems. And for some people it's huge. The grief of burying a loved one. Hard. But God, whether we find ourselves in the midst of great loss or chronic pain or financial trouble or career struggles or relational issues or legal disputes, God, I just pray that we would say, "What can we do?" Like the Apostle Paul with shackles on his legs and his hands to say, "How can we serve? What can we do?" Just like Christ, in the context of Christ, sharing in the sufferings of Christ, say how can we be useful here?

Let us think strategically to be effective. Let's assess all the needs. Let us put first the kingdom's needs first. What are the biggest far-reaching things that we can do for good in this situation? Make us shrewd, make us wise, let us prioritize well, and then God let us never wait, let us work and do it now, whatever it might be. God, I know a lot of people in this room were saying, "Well, I can't because I hurt too much." I pray that we would see even the therapeutic aspects of us putting our hand to the plow and not looking back even when it's hard. Drying our tears just with the headwinds of the heat of summer as we try to go out and do the work in the fields that you called us to do. So God, give us what we need. Empower us. Give us strength to serve you come what may.

In Jesus name. Amen.