

Tifton First United Methodist Church

T-Shirt Theology

A 5-Day Devotion Series

As we are stuck in our homes and limited on where we can go, I thought it would be a good time to turn our attention to those verses that we find so comforting. We put them on t-shirts that we wear or magnets on our refrigerator. They are on canvases and signs around our homes and little pieces of tile on display around our desks. We know these verses well, but often we don't understand them in their context. Please join me over the next five days as we look at these verses in context and see the beauty of God's message for us in His word.

- Pastor Robby

Day 1: Big Plans Jeremiah 29:11 (Read Jeremiah 29:1-14)

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. Of course His plans are for the problem in front of me to go away. He said His plan was to give me a future and a hope. This obviously means that I'm never going to be in want. I will have plenty of money despite my lack of self-control. Everything is going to work out just right because the LORD knows the plans that He has for me. Oh, wait, that's my plans not His.

When we put this into context, we see that the prophet Jeremiah was writing to a people in exile. A people who had just lived through a thirty month siege of their capital city that can only be described with terms like atrocity. After all that time in a living hell, they were taken captive and forced marched to a foreign land. They probably didn't speak the language and the culture was unfamiliar to them. Their Temple was completely destroyed. That seems bad enough, but we can't understand fully how that religious complex was literally the center of the universe for them. They are as hopeless as people can get. All they have left is to call upon their God.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God spoke. Does He say I'm hurrying to your rescue? No. He tells them to settle down. Build homes. Plant gardens. Live in Babylon just like this is how life has always been. Then, in seventy years, He will remember them. They will turn to Him and He will bring them back to the Promised Land. In other words, expect to spend the rest of your lives there because only your youngest children can hope to live long enough to see the promise fulfilled. He, not the Babylonians, but God Himself completely uprooted them from everything familiar so that they might learn to trust Him. If you read all of Jeremiah and his contemporary, Ezekiel, you learn that Israel had forgotten their first love. They had forgotten their God.

Jeremiah 29:11 is no promise of material prosperity. It is not a guarantee that our plans will be successful. It is a rallying call for the people of God to trust in the faithfulness of God. It beckons us to trust that His will is much better than our own. In this season when so many of our plans have been put on hold we should be asking ourselves, "How much do we trust in God's will?" Do our lives in this Babylon culture show us to be the kind of people that trust in the LORD? Think about that today.

Day 2: I'm Going to Overcome Philippians 4:13 (Read Philippians 4:10-13)

If you really believe in your dreams, you should simply pursue them. You must only be willing to put in the hard work. You must be ready to make the sacrifices, pay the price, and put in the time. There is nothing that you can't accomplish if you are willing to do that. Even in this current crisis, our great nation will overcome because we can do all things through Him who gives us strength. That's what the Bible says right? Not exactly.

I do believe that American researchers will develop a vaccine soon and that our nation will come out of this season better off than we were before. It is amazing to see how we care for each other as Americans in times like this. However, I am pretty sure the belief that we can accomplish anything we set our minds to is more of an American idea than a Bible fact. That hasn't stopped all sorts of well meaning people from using Philippians 4:13 out of its context as an inspiration to work towards their dreams or overcome the obstacles in front of them. If you read it in its context though, Paul wasn't talking about overcoming anything.

Paul thanks the Philippians for their concern for him, but he is quick to point out that he is not dependent on them. He is writing from imprisonment in Rome and he says that he has learned the secret of being "content." The Greek word he uses there literally translates as "self-sufficient." Paul knows how to be content no matter what his circumstances. If he is starving, he claims he is still content. If he is well-supplied in a nice house, still content. No matter what the situation Paul says that he is content, or literally "self-sufficient." Paul is not saying that he is self-sufficient so that he can do everything by himself, but that in his inner-most being, he is not lacking. Paul has nothing to fear. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to want. Why? Because he has Christ. He has a personal relationship with his Savior. He knows that he is the adopted son of God. He knows that he is doing his best to follow in Christ's footsteps and even should he face death, it only means gain for him (Phil. 1:21).

As this crisis began we saw many people respond out of a mentality of need. For weeks they have emptied the stores of bread and toilet paper. There has been no lack of supply. Less than half of our toilet paper is imported and only 23% of what is imported comes from China, yet people acted like we would never be able to buy it again. Paul would say that Jesus is enough for him, with or without toilet paper. Is Jesus enough for you? Is your inner-most state of being set by the conditions around you, or is it firmly grounded in your relationship with your Savior? Pray about that today. What Paul had was not unique to him, but freely available to all who would turn to Jesus.

Day 3: We Won't be Shaken! Psalm 16.8 (Read Psalm 16)

Our Sanctuary and Children's buildings were built during the Cold War. They were designed to stand up to a nuclear explosion with fall out shelters under each building. Their walls are a mixture of masonry and reinforced concrete. I am confident that even if a powerful tornado directly hit those buildings, we'd only have to patch the roof and replace windows. We'd be back to business in no time because these buildings can't be shaken. Yet, our hearts aren't as tough as buildings of concrete, brick, and steel.

This is a scary time that we live in. We have little control over what is happening and we have no idea what the future holds for us. Will the situation in our country get as bad or as worse as it has been in other countries? How will our economy fair and will small businesses make it? What happens if millions lose their jobs or if this virus doesn't go away soon? King David declares that the what ifs don't matter, at least as far as his outlook on life is concerned. He joyously sings, "I will not be shaken."

What is the key to his security? Is it because he is a member of the chosen people? No. Is it because he is a wealthy king? Nope. Maybe he has prepared well or his political party is winning? Not that either. It is because the God of Israel is his God. He is not trusting or worshipping anyone or anything else. He delights in God's holy people and he recognizes the source of his blessings. He declares that he has "set the LORD" before him. That God is always at his right hand. This means that his guidance. His direction for life and living come from Yahweh alone. In other Psalms, David says that he meditates on God's word and follows His teachings. Every psalm is a prayer given or song sung to the LORD. It is in an intentional, personal relationship with the Living God, the truth of His word, and the community of His people that David finds his security.

Are you shaken today? Have the troubles of these times caused trouble in your soul? If not, there is a brother or sister in Christ who probably needs to hear from you today so that you can encourage them in their faith. If it has, I encourage you to read Psalm 16 again and meditate upon it. Read also Psalms 23. Know that your pastors or other Christians that you trust are available to pray with you right now. Don't let the uncertainty of this season rob you of the security that is available to you through faith in Jesus. In Him, we won't be shaken.

Day 4: Be Strong and Courageous Joshua 1.9 (Read Joshua 1:1-9)

Some think courage is a lack of fear and strength is about lifting heavy stuff, but life seems to show it is quite the opposite. In this passage God is choosing Joshua as the successor to Moses. Joshua is now charged with leading Israel across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. It is a tough job. This is a momentous task and these people are not easy to lead. What is Joshua to do? Three times God says, "be strong and courageous."

In the middle of saying, "be strong and courageous" three times, God spends two verses telling Joshua to observe all of God's commandments. Joshua is to "meditate on it day and night" and "not turn from it to the right or left." This is only because he's the leader right? Nope. The entire nation is told that many times back over in Deuteronomy. What does obeying God's word have to do with strength and courage? Everything.

Faith takes courage. It is easy to lose hope in a time of fear, but courage is saying to fear, "you don't control me." Courage is trusting that God is good, even when times are not. Faith moves us to live life in a way that reflects the nature of our God. This takes strength even in good times because the cultures of this world, even the American culture, is in opposition to the decrees of the LORD. It is very easy to allow the world to set our values for us. It is even harder in times of need to live in ways that reflect the mercy, generosity, and grace of our God. That takes strength. It is not physical strength but a strength deep down in our souls. I have seen people on their deathbeds who were strong enough to move mountains. Allow God's word and your time of prayer today to strengthen your soul. Be strong and courageous, Amen.

Day 5: I Am With You Always Matthew 28:20 (read Matthew 28:18-20)

What a great comfort to know that our God and Savior is always with us. There is nowhere we can go from His presence (Psalm 139). There is no one or no-thing that can separate us from His love (Romans 8:31-39). Not only does the Father see us from heaven. Not only is the Son continuously praying for us at the right hand of the throne. We also have God the Spirit abiding with us, guiding us, teaching us, and praying with us (Romans 8:26-27). As Jesus promised, there is nothing that can overcome His Church, not even the gates of Hell (Matthew 16:17-19).

Jesus promised to be with us always, even until the end of time. However, let's look at that in context. That promise comes at the end of a command. He says, "Go..." That means get moving. "Go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you." He doesn't say live your best life, for I am with you always. He doesn't say focus on yourself and your own needs, cause I am with you always. He says go and make disciples. Go, initiate them into the community of faith. Go, teach them to be faithful Christians who repeat this process. Don't worry about how you are going to make that happen, because you can't make it happen, that's God's job. Be faithful and obedient and know that He is with us always.

Since we are in this season where we have been forced to stop doing church like we've always done it, it is a good time to evaluate our obedience to the Great Commission. Are we going, moving, getting out of our bubble? Are we baptizing more than infants? Are we making disciples of the nations right here in little ol' Tifton? Are we teaching ourselves and others to observe what Christ has taught us? Are we doing things that can only be accomplished because Christ is with us? Those answers don't come from the pulpit, they come from the pews. Let's pray during this season that when life returns to normal, church does not. Let us return with boldness, strength, and courage because our God is always with us. Our Jesus is sufficient. Because of that, we will not be shaken. May God bless you and keep you, may He cause His face to shine upon you, may He be gracious unto you and give you peace, Amen.