

Do Not Be Afraid . . . We Are in This Together!

Introduction

The Text

¹¹ After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. ¹² Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. ¹³ And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. ¹⁴ There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. ¹⁵ And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. (Acts 28:11–15)

Paul Took Courage

- A. We're going to take another week here in our Do Not Be Afraid . . . series. And this week we drop into the last chapter of the book of Acts.
- B. You may recall, a few weeks back, we spent some time in [Acts 27](#), with Paul and the shipwreck on his way to Rome and things.
 - 1. Well, as I finished reading the book in my own time, another little detail caught my attention, and I made note of it on the off chance that I may have the time and inspiration to return to it at some later point. As it turns out, I did and I do and so here we are.
- C. The little detail I'm referring to here is found there in [v. 15](#) which we would do well to read once more: ["And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage."](#)
 - 1. Now, obviously, for the purpose of this sermon series it is that last little note that is of the utmost concern to us. When Paul saw these brothers (which in the Greek likely includes sisters as well) coming down from Rome to meet him along the way, ["Paul thanked God and took courage."](#)
- D. There is something about Christian community, something about the assembling, the gathering, the fellowship of the saints that is courage-giving.
 - 1. You see, one of the ways we fight anxiety and fear, one of the ways we're enabled to obey this command of God found throughout the Scriptures that we "not be afraid" is by leaning in on one another, the church, our brothers and our sisters in the Christ!
 - a. Hence, the title of this morning's message: Do Not Be Afraid . . . We Are in This Together!

Out of Touch?

- A. Now, I know it may seem strange, and perhaps even a bit out of touch, to deliver a sermon highlighting the importance of community in the face of trial at a time when part of the trial we are facing is that we are not able to gather in community.
1. That's not lost on me. That's actually part of the point here. That's part of why I feel this topic is of such importance. I sense that the longer this goes on the more complacent, the more insular, the more apathetic we'll be prone to get when it comes to community and connecting with other people.
 - a. I've talked to a lot of you who are saying you kind of feel that weird lethargy and inertia, where you're just kind of pulling away from people and receding into your own little world. "Okay, we can jump online for church now and then but life is easier without anyone else in it" . . . at least it feels that way at first.
 - i. But we're getting caught in this slow drift away from one another. And I'm here with this text saying: "Don't go out to sea with the current. Fight. Kick. Swim with all you have towards community in Christ, because your life and your joy and your courage depend on it!"
- B. Now, please do not read into this some theologically garbed political ploy to get us to buck the governing authorities in the name of Jesus and just start meeting in whatever way we want. That's not where I'm going with this at all.
1. We're going to err here at Mercy Hill on the side of protecting the vulnerable and at-risk among us. We're going to follow the recommendations of those who are much smarter on this until it becomes painfully clear that they are singling out Christians and trying to systematically undermine the mission of the church.
 - a. Right now, I may be naïve, but I just think they're trying their best, and I don't want us to have this chip on our shoulder where we get so busy fighting for our right to worship Christ in the ways we want that we stop looking like Him to the city and world around us.
 - i. In this critical hour, I don't want us to add to the wounds of our nation—with our pushing and pulling and backbiting and finger-pointing. I want us to be agents of healing—with our humility and our patience and our kindness and our generosity and our grace.
- C. So, again, with this sermon . . .
1. I am not saying: Who cares about the shelter-in-place orders and safety measures and things.
 2. I am saying: In all our social distancing, in all our mask-wearing and hand-washing, in this awkward and hard season where we can't be with one another like we used to be, like we want to be, don't let yourself grow complacent and aloof, don't slowly fade from the radar, don't let your soul slip into laxity and relational atrophy.

- a. It's a frightening thought that one of the effects of all of this would be that we all slowly grow okay with keeping our distance, maintaining our boundaries, doing our own thing, sticking to our little bubbles and our little worlds.
 - i. May it never be! Fight to connect and stay in community with others, by whatever means possible and permissible—and in this modern world, by God's grace, there are a lot of means at our disposal!

Needy and Needed

- A. So, reflecting on this little verse in [Acts 28](#), there are two things we're going to look at this morning in particular (though I'll bring a third in at the end): (1) We Are Needy; and (2) We Are Needed. If we're going to get through these hard times, we need to do it together.
 - 1. I should quickly say that, with these two points, I realized after the fact that I inadvertently stole them from the two section titles within Ed Welch's marvelous little book *Side by Side*. If you're looking for some good summer reading, and you want to grow in your relationships with others, you should put this one on the top of your list.

Paul's Letter to the Romans

- A. Now, before we dive into a consideration of these two points in particular, let me show you in a more general way how I was brought to see this with Paul here.
- B. Paul, in our text is finally making his way to Rome. I say "finally" because it seems he's been trying to get there for quite some time now.
- C. From the book of Acts we know that, a while back, he began sensing the Spirit was leading him to start heading in this direction (cf. [Acts 19:21](#)). And then we saw how much he had to put up with along the way.
 - 1. He was chained up in Jerusalem and the Roman authorities were trying to figure out what to do with him.
 - 2. His own countrymen were after his life because of his commitment to Jesus and the gospel.
 - 3. So he appealed his case to Caesar which would eventually take him to Rome.
 - 4. So he's thrown on a ship with other prisoners and things, and he nearly dies there in that shipwreck, but they all make it out alive, washing up onto the shore of an island named Malta.
 - 5. And then after the winter months had passed, when it became safe to sail the Mediterranean once more, they made their way up towards Italy and Rome.
- D. But Paul's letter to the Romans, written some three years or so prior to his actual arrival there, gives a different vantage point on the matter, and it's important that we see it. Because in this letter we're told not just that he wanted to get to Rome, or how he went about getting there . . . but why he wanted to go there in first place. He actually begins and ends the epistle with reference to this.

1. So first Rom 1: “⁸ I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you¹⁰ always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you . . .¹⁵ I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (vv. 8–13, 15).

2. But then, later, Rom 15: “²² . . . I have so often been hindered from coming to you.²³ But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you,²⁴ I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. . . .²⁹ I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.
³⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf,³¹ that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,³² so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company” (vv. 22–24, 29, 30-32).

E. I wonder if you’re seeing it? These two realities woven side by side. Paul longs to go to Rome and see the believers there, because he is both needy and needed.

1. Why does he want to go to Rome?
 - a. Because he wants to be **encouraged** by their faith (Rom 1:12);
 - b. because he wants to be **helped** by them in his missionary endeavors (Rom 15:24);
 - c. because he wants to **enjoy** their company for a while (Rom 15:24);
 - d. because he wants to be **refreshed** by their fellowship (Rom 15:32).
 - i. In other words, Paul is longing to get to Rome because he himself is needy. He needs the encouragement of the saints. He knows how important such a thing is, even for him, especially for him . . . in the midst of all he was called to deal with and do for the kingdom.

2. But there’s more. This isn’t just some self-centered thing for Paul. This is a mutually edifying thing. This is a synergetic, symbiotic thing. This is a beautifully Christian thing—where we are equally served and serving. And so Paul lays out here other reasons for his longing to get to Rome. Why?
 - a. Because he wants to impart some **spiritual gift** to strengthen them (Rom 1:11);
 - b. because he not only wants to be encouraged by their faith, he also wants to **encourage** them with his (Rom 1:12);
 - c. because **reap some harvest** among them (Rom 1:13), which basically means: “I want to see good fruit cropping up in your life”;
 - d. because he wants to **preach the gospel** to them and unfold for them the glory of the grace of God for them in Christ (Rom 1:15);

e. because he wants to pour out upon them something of the [fullness of the blessing of Christ \(Rom 15:29\)](#).

i. In other words, Paul is longing to get to Rome because he knows he's needed. They need his gifts, his care, his wisdom in the Scriptures, his friendship. They need him to take what God has entrusted to him in the Spirit and use it for their upbuilding and the common good of the church.

F. So, why is Paul longing to get to Rome? Because he's needy. And because he's needed. And in [Acts 28:15](#), he's finally arrived!

G. Now, what we're going to do with what time remains here is consider these two points (We Are Needy; We Are Needed) particularly with reference to this verse in [Acts 28](#).

1. For each we'll first look at things first concerning Paul's story and then we'll consider how it comes to relate to our own.

(1) We Are Needy

Paul's Story

A. I think we're prone in all domains of life to exalt our heroes—whether we're talking about athletes or politicians or professors. And we can even do this in the spiritual domain with our religious leaders and things—with guys like Paul.

1. He seems to us perhaps to be almost invincible, something superhuman. He's just not needy like the rest of us. That's why in our old art depicting these apostles like Paul, we put glowing haloes around their heads, as if to say: "They are not like us—they're made of something different. They're on a different level or plane of existence."

a. But this is simply not the case. Paul was needy just like us.

B. So, again, in [Acts 28:15](#), we read that, when these Roman believers came down to him as he was making his way up, he "[took courage](#)"—which clearly implies he was feeling something a little less than courageous just moments before, you see?

1. And that I suppose is my point here. Paul needed to see these brothers and sisters. He was perhaps struggling with anxiety and fear and their company changed all that for him.

C. If you'll permit a little conjecture here for just a moment. . .

Conjecture #1: Feeling Alone?

A. It may have been that he was beginning to feel dreadfully alone. Sure he had Luke along with him, but perhaps after all this time in prison and on ship and in foreign lands, he was longing to see some old friends.

1. Well, while he had not yet been to Rome himself, he had known quite a few Romans along the way. You can find a decent-sized list of names in the last chapter of Romans ([Rom 16](#)), where he's sending his greetings to people like Prisca and Aquila and others.
 - a. Is it too far-fetched to think that some of these were the very ones who came out to meet him. After all he'd been through to get here. What joy such a thing would bring to his heart. What strength to his faith. What courage!

B. Can't we relate?

1. I remember when all this Coronavirus stuff was first going down, and there were weeks there where I didn't see any of you, and we didn't get the whole zoom thing figured out until finally we did that Good Friday service.
 - a. And as people were logging on and we started singing and things, I just started crying, happy tears. This is hard and I miss my friends my spiritual family—worshiping and building up each other. Seeing you, even over a screen, it helped push the fear back. And I took courage.

Conjecture #2: Questioning God?

- A. It may also have been that Paul was in some ways questioning God's call on his life and struggling with whether he's fulfilling it or not.
1. Oh sure, he seems so strong to us, but we can imagine there would be doubts. Jesus has already had to come to him in a vision in the night and exhort him to "[take courage](#)" and keep going ([Acts 23:11](#)). Other places he says that he's been in such dire straits that he's "[despaired \[even\] of life itself](#)" ([2 Cor 1:8](#)). So I don't think it's too far-fetched to say that, after all the persecution and shipwreck and delays and things, he may be struggling a bit here.
 - a. And when these fellow believers come hurrying down from Rome to see him, it's just confirming, isn't it? God is with him. The Spirit has been guiding him to this point. His prayers uttered long ago that he would make it here, have been answered. Jesus is on the move!

B. Don't you get that?

1. I can't tell you how many times I've been down on myself and my ministry and wondering what God is doing, where He is in all of it . . . and then in comes a text or an email. "You're just on my heart brother and I wanted to tell you how much what you're doing means to me. So thankful for you. Praying for you. Keep it up!"
 - a. And, again, I just well up. God, it feels like you're a million miles away sometimes, but you're right here. And I take courage.

Conjecture #3: Worried of Rejection?

- A. It may also have been that he was worried he would be rejected by the Christians there. I mean, he'd just been rejected by his own countrymen the Jews. He's tasted betrayal in the church before. Is that what was waiting for him here? Would they be ashamed of his chains. "It looks like God's not with him. Let's disassociate before that happens to us." It was a legitimate fear for him.
 - 1. But what takes place is precisely the opposite. It seems almost as if they've been waiting for him. They're not ashamed. They're excited!
 - a. Paul is traveling likely by foot from the city of Puteoli—which to Rome would have been about 120 miles in total. And even while he's days out, these people are starting to show up from Rome, coming some 30 or 40 miles just to greet him, meeting him in the "Forum of Appius" and in a place called "Three Taverns."
 - i. NT scholar Craig Keener sees in their warm reception an allusion to the sort of thing people would do for royal emissaries or officials. They would come out a long ways from the city and meet the notable person as a sign of highest honor and respect.
- C. In other words, Paul is not being rejected or shamed here. He is being appreciated, loved, and even honored. So, understandably then, "[o]n seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage" (Acts 28:15).

Our Story

- A. Now, listen to me, if the great Paul the apostle needed brothers and sisters in Christ to help him stay the course in hard times, to encourage and embolden him, so do we. We need each other.
 - 1. What God said over the lone Adam in Gen 2:18 is still true to this day: "It is not good that . . . man should be alone."
 - a. I don't care what your Meyers-Briggs or your Enneagram type is—"I'm an introvert, I don't need people, Nick"—God says you do. And you're not going to make it through this alone.
- B. This is one of the reasons, by the way, why people are watching out for climbing suicide rates during this time of shelter-in-place. Claims are all over the place, and I couldn't find any clear statistics on the matter, but one thing is clear: people in the know are bracing for more suicides.
 - 1. And one of the reasons is because we need each other and yet we're having to keep our distance.
 - a. Harvard psychology professor Matthew Nock spoke to the New York Times on why there seems to be an increase in suicides during the pandemic. "There's not only an increase in anxiety, but the more important piece is social isolation. We've never had anything like this—and we know social isolation is related to suicide."
- C. So what can we do? I've got three quick suggestions . . .

Suggestion #1: Embrace the Truth

- A. By this I simply mean stop denying the fact that you're needy. For dudes this is especially hard. We like to think we have it together. We've been taught that being needy is a sign of weakness and immaturity and things. It's pathetic and embarrassing and childish. We've not been taught it's actually human and normal and even healthy. So first we need to embrace this truth, make peace with it.

Suggestion #2: Move Towards Community

- A. This sounds pretty simple, but it is a lot more complex during this season of social distancing. So you've got to get creative and not give up. If you are struggling with fear and anxiety, this will be a tough step to take. It takes a lot of courage to start moving towards people when you're not feeling strong. And it's especially hard right now. But it's all the more important.
 - 1. So this might look like shooting text to someone from church asking if they'd be interested in praying with you, filling out the Connection Card and requesting to connect with a pastor or leader, joining up with one of our Home Groups, DNA Groups or Men's/Women's studies. Coming into the Afterparty today. It means pushing into awkward spaces because you know you need people in your life. You need the courage that comes from community in Christ.
 - a. When Paul was imprisoned he didn't give up on community because it was harder, he made use of whatever means he had—letters, messengers, smoke signals. We've got Zoom and smartphones and social distancing walks and things. It's not ideal, but it's better than nothing!

Suggestion #3: Share Your Heart and Life

- A. You embrace the truth that you are needy and weak and need encouragement from others, so you move towards community and press into those awkward spaces, and you share your heart, you ask for prayer, you ask for help, you don't go to all that trouble and then put on a façade like all is fine. You get real. It's only then that God can really meet you and help you take courage.

(2) We Are Needed

Paul's Story

- A. For Paul, you realize he was willing to go to great lengths to get to Rome. Throughout his ministry he's had people trying to stop him and warning him that it's going to be hard and things. And he says: "Listen, I know it's going to be hard. '[T]he Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me' (Acts 20:23). But I've been called to this. These people need me and the gospel and gifts God's entrusted to me. I've got to go. I want to encourage them."

Our Story

- A. Now, here again we're tempted I think to do the same sort of thing we did with the first one—where we put Paul into a category all on his own, and we say: "Of course he's needed. He's Paul—Damascus road, caught up to third heaven, super-missionary—Paul. Of course he's needed. But nobody needs Nick Weber. Give me a break. It just feels silly and presumptuous even saying it out loud."
1. But it's not me who's saying this, it's God.
- B. Paul mentioned in [Rom 1](#) longing to go to Rome so he could "impart to [them] some spiritual gift" (v. 11).
1. And I think that's interesting because it's this idea of spiritual gifts that would lead Paul in a later epistle to the Corinthians to develop this image of the body of Christ. And he talks about how each member of the body has certain gifts and things that are needed by the whole for it to function properly: " ¹⁴For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, yet one body" (1 Cor 12:14–20).
 - a. We don't need a million apostle Paul's. We need Johns and Christinas, Bens and Danielles, Peters and Christines, Mikes and Jills, Carls and Rosies, Tolus and Debbies, and on and on I could go. We need you.
- C. So if you're needed right now by this church, and all the more during this season; if your presence matters in our fight for faith and courage in the face of frightening times—what can you do to start to walk more in that?
1. Well, I've got the same three quick suggestions, just with a slightly different spin put on them . . .

Suggestion #1: Embrace the Truth

- A. By this I simply mean, some of us need to trust God has really gifted us and believe we matter to the kingdom and the church. Others of us, aren't worried about whether we're gifted or not, we're too busy with our own lives and plans. And we need to realize we're needed here. If you are pulling away from the church because you're distracted with all your worldly pursuits or whatever, you've got to realize you are letting people down. There's a hole where you should be.
1. God has gifted you, is calling you, has sent you to the people of this church to care for them, encourage them. Are you doing it?

Suggestion #2: Move Towards Community

- A. So here it's similar to what we said before. You get that you're needed so you've got to get in the game. You've got to go where the people are. Right now this might mean doing awkward stuff like Zoom calls and things. But it also might mean that you flip through that new church directory we just sent out, and you pray for folks, and you shoot texts to folks with Scripture that's on your heart for them. You move towards in this time especially. You get creative with it and pursue others to hear how they are doing.

Suggestion #3: Share Your Heart and Life

- A. With this now we mean, as you realize your presence matters and you move towards people, and they start sharing their burdens with you, you're going to find things to do, ways God's calling you to serve and love.
1. In many ways, as with Paul, it's going to cost you your life. There's going to be inconvenience and struggle and even suffering for the sake of others. But in it, strangely, you'll also find joy! As Paul says to the Corinthians: *"I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls"* (2 Cor 12:15).

(3) We Are Not Enough

Walking towards Jesus Together

- A. But now there's a third piece here that I didn't identify up front, but I want to close with now. And it's this idea that, while we are needy, and, while we are needed, . . . we are most certainly not enough.
- B. What I mean is this:
1. If we come away expecting others in the church to fill us and thinking they ought to meet our deepest needs, we're in big trouble. We're going to devour people with our desires and expectations and our laundry list of ways they let us down. We're going to become something like black holes, swallowing up those in our path, looking for people to do for us what only God can do.
 2. And, on the other side, if we come away expecting that we can and should somehow fill others and meet their deepest needs, we're in big trouble. We're going to burn out and grow exhausted and even bitter. We're going to become something like dried up wells, trying to do for people what only God can do for them.
 - a. It is absolutely true that we need each other. But, at the same time, we are not enough for each other. We are going to let each other down.
- C. The point in all of this isn't that you are supposed to fill me and I'm supposed to fill you. The point is that we should come alongside each other and, side by side, hand in hand, begin to walk towards Jesus and the cross together. We don't fill each other. We walk with each other towards the only One who can fill us both!

D. You've got to know Paul knows this.

1. Paul knew he needed the saints, but he also knew they would never be enough for him. Did he take courage that day when brothers and sisters from Rome came out to meet him? Yes, absolutely he did. But were they the ultimate source of his courage, the one he began to hope in and attach his joy to? No.

a. That's hinted at even in the way Luke described it: "On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage" (Acts 28:15). He saw God in their greeting. It led him to the Lord.

i. And that's a good thing, because the next time Paul came to be imprisoned in Rome, it would seem this whole welcoming party was nowhere to be found. Awaiting execution, he writes Timothy: " ¹⁶At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. . . . ¹⁷But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me . . . ¹⁸The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (2 Tim 4:16–18).

(1) "I need people. I'm encouraged by my brothers and sisters in the church. But my ultimate needs are met in Jesus and He won't ever leave me, forsake me, or let me down!"

2. And on the other side, Paul knew people needed him, but he also knew he would never be enough for them. That's why he's always pointing them to Jesus, even when they're trying to exalt him.

a. Do you remember what he wrote to the Corinthians: " ¹²[E]ach one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ.' ¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" (1 Cor 1:12–13).

i. Do you hear what he's saying? "You don't ultimately need me. I can't save you. I didn't die for your sins and rise for your justification. Jesus did. Therefore, 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor 2:2). He's the One you need. Not me."

E. The book of Acts ends with Luke's description of what Paul was doing while imprisoned there in Rome, and it's beautiful: " ³⁰He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:30–31).

1. Paul knows ultimately what we need is Jesus, and our job in community is to keep each other looking to, trusting in, walking towards Him. And therein we will find our courage and our strength in dark days.

a. We are needy. We are needed. But we are never enough. He is!